



NEW LINE CINEMA  
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# FINAL DESTINATION



DEATH DOESN'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

A NOVELIZATION BY NATASHA RHODES

BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE  
STORY BY JEFFREY REDDICK SCREENPLAY BY GLEN MORGAN  
& JAMES WONG AND JEFFREY REDDICK

# PROLOGUE

*Among all the things that happen under the sun,  
this is the worst: that things turn out the  
same for all.*

-Ecclesiastes, Chapter 9

There are certain things you shouldn't do before boarding an airplane.

Reading up on aircraft crash statistics is one of them. Watching disaster movies is another. A third would be checking the news channel to read about that plane that went down last month, and discovering that the crashed plane had an eerily significant flight number—the last three digits of your zip code, perhaps, or maybe your favorite aunt's birthday

It's a great way to freak yourself out before your flight, but chances are, you'll still go anyway, because these things always happen to someone else, right?

Of course, if you happen to be the pilot of a jumbo jet, it's quite likely that you do all three of these things on a daily basis, because if there's one thing you should never underestimate when you're placed in sole charge of three hundred-odd lives, it's fate.

Charlie Mannings knew a lot about fate. Fate was the reason he joined the aviation industry in the first place. A chance encounter with a fighter pilot at an early age had made a big impression on young Charlie, and after that, being an airline pilot was all he dreamed about. By the age of thirty, he was one of the top pilots in the state, and fate had guided him every step of the way. Fate stepped in when Charlie was transferred to Volee-Air just a month after moving to New York, and again when he agreed to cover two extra flights when a freak road accident put the pilot of Flight 179 and Flight 180 in hospital. At the time, the pilot of those flights thought that he was pretty unlucky, although in retrospect, he believed that the accident was probably the luckiest thing that ever happened to him.

The one thing fate couldn't help Charlie with was the thing he craved the most that morning: a really good beef and pickle sandwich.

Charlie stood on the asphalt outside Terminal One and peered glumly into the prepacked lunchbox that arrived like clockwork on his desk every morning at five am. He'd asked for beef and pickle every day for almost two weeks now, and unfailingly, he'd either get egg and ham, or some new and daring combination never tried outside the realms of the mass transit aviation industry, such as egg and pilchard, or egg and Spam. Everything seems to have egg in it, Charlie reflected as he poked moodily through his lunchbox, hoping to find something remotely edible hidden amongst the various individually shrink-wrapped packages of bland colored, squishy foodstuffs. It was almost as though the aviation and poultry industries were in cahoots, pedaling their unwanted eggs to a captive audience.

Whatever, the end result was that once again, Charlie was unhappy with his lunch. Standing just twenty feet away from him, dwarfed by the muscular shape of the huge, silent jumbo jet, was one of the airline's engineers making a final check of the plane's innards. He was also unhappy with his lunch, though he wouldn't know this till almost four hours later, when the egg and haggis sandwich he'd just consumed would bite back at him; a combination of salmonella and dumb luck striking him down and taking him off his shift for almost a week.

However, in four hours, a lot can happen.

Charlie stuffed his packed lunch back in his bag and zipped it up, stubbed out his cigarette, heaved a self-pitying sigh and started walking back towards the terminal building. Fate really was a bitch, he reflected, but hell, there was always tomorrow. Nobody ever knows what the future may bring, and his only hope was that beef and pickles featured prominently in his.

Behind him, the last engineer unplugged the fuel pump from the belly of Flight 180, and went on his way, idly tossing his empty sandwich wrapper into a nearby trash can.

In the sky above the plane, storm clouds started to amass.

# ONE

Alex Chance Browning stood beside his bed and frowned down at his half-filled suitcase. Only two things in this life were certain, he thought: death, and packing. Right now, he wondered if perhaps death might be a welcome respite from the drudgery of folding underwear and sorting out clothes.

He banished the thought quickly. He was flying out to Paris in less than twelve hours. The last thing he wanted to do was tempt fate.

Yawning, Alex moved across to the window and flung it open, letting a welcome, cool breeze into his cluttered, stuffy room. It had been a long, hot day, and now it was a hot night, made worse by the unseasonable high humidity. A warm spring thunderstorm beat at the open window, splattering the sill with crystal clear beads of water. Lightning flashed across the dark sky outside, and rain clattered down the black windowpane as dark clouds gathered overhead in angry gray piles.

Sat on the window sill, an old-fashioned desk fan, humming and tilting back and forth in a blur of whirling light in a vain attempt to shift the warm, wet air. As Alex moved about the room, busying himself with his packing, the breeze lifted his tatty, patterned curtains and set his Day of the Dead skeleton puppet dancing and capering in the window, brought back to a ghastly semblance of life by the living wind. Next to it, a monkey puppet and a scarecrow looked on, hanging by their necks from thin cords, their glassy eyes glinting in the dim light.

On the shelf by the window, the propellers on a silver model airplane started up, caught by the draft.

Lightning flashed again and the AC supply spiked, changing the pitch of the fan from a pleasant hum to a low groan; almost a roar. His interest sparked, Alex looked up from his case and watched the fan curiously for a moment. He'd never heard a fan make a sound like that before. The noise seemed to creep under his skin, making the hair on the back of his neck prickle, and raising goose bumps on his tanned arms.

He glanced fretfully out the window. Thunderstorms always freaked him out, as did anything he couldn't control. There was something about all that primitive energy being released that scared the bejesus out of him.

Still, at least it was outside and he was inside. He was safe for now.

Thunder grumbled in the far distance, striking a minor third and briefly harmonizing with the hum of the fan. The whispery whirl of the toy airplane's propellers joined in, and Alex glanced over at it, spooked. Maybe that was why he was feeling so weirded out. The impending flight hung heavily in his mind, and Alex tried not to think about it. There was some major league being-out-of-control-ness going on, and the less he thought about it, the better.

Trying to shake off his feeling of unease, Alex strode over to his bookcase, glanced down at the titles, then selected three books at random and threw them into the suitcase. That will do to read on the flight, he thought to himself. Or rather, that would do to pretend to read while ogling the girls, of which he was sure there'd be plenty.

Alex grinned to himself. Worse comes to worst, he could always use the books to beat Tod over the head with when he started telling fart jokes to the female flight attendants. Having a best friend who behaves younger than you certainly had its pitfalls, and it wouldn't be the first time Alex had wondered whether he wouldn't be better off with a chimp as a sidekick.

The fan continued to whirl back and forth, light flashing across its blades like a strobe. Reaching into his pocket, Alex tossed his flight ticket down on top of the teetering pile of guidebooks, maps and loose currency beside his suitcase. Can't forget that. The breeze from the fan caught the ticket on its way down, sending it fluttering across the bed. Alex stretched out a hand to retrieve it, idly scanning the details as he did so: "VOLEE-AIR. Flight 180. New York City (NYC)—Paris, Charles de Gaulle (CDG). Departure: Thursday 13MAY 21H25."

Alex paused as the date on the ticket jumped out at him. Thursday the thirteenth. Whoa, that was close! He bit his lip in sudden worry. If his flight had been on a Friday, he would probably have cancelled the trip.

Not that he was superstitious or anything...

"Alex!" a voice cried.

Alex spun round as his bedroom door banged open and his mother, Barbara, walked into the room, her bleached curls bouncing. A stack of laundry was resting in the crook of one arm. Alex sighed inwardly, wishing she would knock. At seventeen, a little privacy would be much appreciated. His mother crossed the room in two brisk strides and deposited a load of freshly ironed clothes on top of Alex's already overstuffed suitcase.

"Tod and George's dad just called; he's picking you up at three thirty. Bus leaves the high school for the airport around five." She beamed at him, the very picture of motherly pride.

Alex nodded his thanks to her, wishing that she would stop fussing. A moment later, a second figure appeared behind her in the doorway—Alex's father Ken, a graying, kind faced man in a checked, blue work shirt. He watched his offspring struggle with his packing, and a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"My suitcase workin' out for ya?"

Alex nodded offhandedly and buckled it up with a thick leather strap, eager to get on the road. This was to be his very first trip away to another country without his folks, and he intended to make the most of it. He loved his parents dearly, but felt that he would probably love them a great deal more from several thousand miles away where they couldn't nag at him every minute of the day.

He turned away from them, hiding a smile.

His mother spotted a leftover baggage ID tag on the handle of the case, still attached from a previous flight, and moved quickly to rip it off, but Alex intercepted her and threw out a hand to stop her.

"Whoa! Mom, you gotta leave that one," he explained hastily, cupping his hand protectively over the tag. "It's like... this tag made the last flight without the plane crashin' or anything, right?" His gaze anxiously flicked to his father for reassurance, who nodded back at him sagely. "So, it should stay on, or *with* the bag for good luck."

His mother rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Where would you get a nutball idea like that?"

Alex made eye contact with his dad, who turned away, grinning. His mother looked up at her husband accusingly, then quickly ripped the tag off and hid it in her hand while Alex wasn't looking. In her mind, she heard cheering crowds. Mom: one, Alex: zero. Airport baggage handlers were so slapdash these days. The last thing she wanted was her son's personal belongings being sent to Guatemala instead of Paris. There was no place for lucky charms in the days of the electronic bag check.

She crumpled the airport tag in her hand and turned back to her son, hoping that he would enjoy himself on the trip. It would be a great experience for him, particularly at his age. She had fond memories of France from the backpacking days of her own youth, and hopefully Alex would have a similarly great time. He might even meet some girls, which would stop him from hanging out with those no-good friends of his.

Not that she wasn't fond of Tod, it was just that there were only so many fart jokes she could stand in one day.

Barbara looked at Alex as he bustled about his room, glancing into drawers and wincing as he fingered the sensible shirts she had picked out for him. He was a good-looking kid with his sandy hair and handsome, sensitive face. He'd inherited her steely blue eyes and Ken's sturdy, athletic physique, which was pretty much wasted on him given his total disregard for sports. He always looked faintly worried about something, which Barbara put down to too many of those horror stories he liked to read on the Internet.

His father filling him with cornball worries didn't help matters either.

Shaking her head, Barbara reached down and grabbed the handle of the suitcase, lifting it up off the bed, ready to take it out to the car. As she did so, a dozen old baggage ID tickets spilled from the unzipped outer pocket; a secret stash to guard against the idle whims of fate.

Barbara glanced up at her husband, who looked away guiltily. Like father, like son.

Ken shrugged. "I'm still here," he said, by way of explanation.

Barbara shook her head in wonder, then she saw the pride in her husband's eyes mixed with worry, and they shared a smile. This school trip to France was a big thing for Alex; a whole week of independence and fun. She only hoped that he wouldn't screw it up. He was a good kid, but he had some funny ideas sometimes, this superstitious phase being the latest. She hoped that he would grow out of it soon, because she was getting kind of tired of finding lucky rabbit's feet strewn all over the house whenever she cleaned.

Ken glanced away and smiled down at his son, voicing his wife's thoughts. "Seventeen and on the loose. Ten days in Paris with your friends in the summer!" Ken winked at his son. "Live it up, Alex. Got your whole life ahead of you."

Outside the window, as though on cue, the thunder crashed.

Alex stared at his dad and shivered, fighting down a sudden wave of goose bumps.

He really, really wished his father wouldn't say things like that.

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Later that night, Alex slumbered in his bed, cocooned from the world by his thick, downy comforter and an extra blanket. The room was suffused by the gray, rainy light, and toys and model trains crowded the shelves, peering down at Alex, silent spectators to Exhibit A: Boy, Asleep.

In sleep, Alex looked like a child, the teenage worries of school, girls, friends and exams absent from his face as though they had been airbrushed off. The room was filled with a thick silence; blue-black shadows streaking the walls like paint. The summer storm had died down somewhat, although slow drops of rain still pattered down the closed window.

As Alex slept, the rotors on the steel model airplane up on the shelf started creaking around, slowly at first, but then moving with ever increasing speed. On the wall, his Fighting Colonials pennant fluttered lightly as though a breeze was moving over it, despite the fact that the window was closed and the fan was off. The unseen breeze continued on around the room, nudging the bedroom door



open with a *creak*, and ruffling through Alex's hair as he lay sleeping. Alex frowned in his sleep and drew the covers more tightly around him, shivering from the sudden cold.

A moment later, the mysterious breeze died down, dissipating like water into the dry earth. The model airplane's rotors creaked to a halt and the pennant settled. The room was still again, except for the light rising and falling of Alex's chest as he slipped deeper into sleep.

The table fan sat silently on the windowsill, its blades glinting silver in the moonlight.

Beside Alex, the digital clock on his bedside table hummed over to one am, and as it did so, it crackled faintly, affected by another mild power surge. The center bar of the first zero briefly flickered into life as the display corrupted for a single heartbeat, reading 1:80 am.

If Alex had been awake, he would've recognized his flight number—Flight 180—and probably would have freaked out about it.

Right now, he had better things to do.

Like sleep.

# TWO

The International Terminal at JFK was busy, packed with a constant stream of travelers descending en masse, anxious to beat the weekend rush. Ironically, Thursday was the busiest day of the week for the airport for this very reason. Everyone thought they were outsmarting the system and avoiding the crowds, when in reality, they were only joining them. It was mankind's unique folly to think so far ahead that people met themselves in a circle coming back the other way, unable to figure out what was going on.

Outside the building, Alex hoisted his heavy bag a little higher up on his shoulder and gazed around apprehensively at the terminal. He really, really wished it wasn't called that. It always sounded so, well... terminal. With the frame of mind he was in, he wanted to see big, reassuring signs announcing that all airplanes had just been upgraded by the military and were now officially one hundred percent crash proof, or at the very least 99.99 percent crash proof.

He knew that he would still worry even then.

Alex sighed and hoisted his bag again, waiting for the teachers to arrive. The unloading area outside the main entrance was alive with movement and noise, the blaring PA pouring forth a constant volley of announcements in English, German and French. Stressed out tourists shuffled back and forth, pulling carts piled high with luggage, anxious to get to the duty-free shops and stock up on smokes and booze before their flights. Hyperactive children crowded around the arcade by the entrance, spending their allowances on digital bloodshed, while armed police stood around idly watching them with looks of resigned boredom on their pale, sun deprived faces.

Behind Alex, students poured out of Mount Abraham minibuses and cars in a constant stream of excitement and bottled-up hormones. Four teachers and several parents waited with them, clucking impatiently under their breath as the last few stragglers arrived. The students were casually dressed, some wearing Fighting Colonial letterman's jackets, while others wore hats and shirts

reading "Mt Abraham High, NY" in red and yellow lettering. They chatted and giggled excitedly, thrilled to be out of school on a weekday.

As Alex watched, Carter Horton, the class dickhead, strode rapidly along the straggling line of students, looking for an easy target. His neatly-sewn letter jacket billowed out behind him as he marched down the line, an arrogant look on his handsome, cold face. He quickly found a victim in the tall, earnest shape of Billy Hitchcock. Dressed in an oversized New York Rangers jersey, with a baseball cap jammed backwards onto his mop of unruly brown hair, Billy stuck out a mile.

Carter smiled. Easy prey.

He stepped up smoothly behind Billy, smiling broadly, his eyes gleaming with malice. "Hey, Hitchcock! Lemme give you a hand with this, man," he said.

With that, he stooped down and hefted the heaviest looking bag he could find off the cart next to him, and casually hung it over Billy's unsuspecting shoulder. Thrown off balance, Billy went down like a rock under the weight of the bag.

"Carter, you dick!" he grumbled from ground level.

Carter sniggered, smugly twining his hand with that of his girlfriend Terry and striding off up the line. Terry Chaney was sixteen, blonde as butter, and about half as bright. Her crimped ringlets swung round her face as she giggled delightedly at her boyfriend's latest misdemeanor. She gingerly stepped over the fallen Billy, her matching pink, two-piece luggage set on wheels nearly running him over as she skimmed past, leaving him lying on the ground.

Together, the pair of them marched onwards in search of fresh meat, or failing that, a quiet place to make out.

Alex stood patiently by the curb waiting for Tod as the last of the students stumbled out of their vehicles. His initial worry about the flight had given way to excitement that he was back among his friends, and he buzzed with nervous energy as he gazed eagerly around, enjoying the sights and sounds of the airport and the fun of being out of school.

Tod's dad, Mr Waggner, stood beside him, lecturing both Tod and his brother George on the evil ways of French girls. Tod was listening to his dad with half an ear, yawning and scratching at his mop of spiky brown hair that sat atop his tall, gangly frame like a sprouting carrot. Judging by the expression on his good humored, freckled face, he'd heard it all before.

Alex followed Tod's gaze and saw that the majority of his attention was firmly fixed on the two tall, leggy girls who had just gotten out of a waiting cab. They were both dressed alike in nearly identical baby blue outfits: one blonde, the other brunette. Tanned and toned, they both had perfectly styled hair and white, white teeth. Judging by their haughty air and disdainful manner, their parents had money, big time.

They were beautiful, radiant, and totally unobtainable, which of course made them number one on Tod's hit list.

An overeager smile lit up Tod's face as they passed him, and he followed them hopefully for a couple of steps, ignoring his dad.

"Hey, Christa! Hi Blake!" he called loudly. The girls looked at one another and rolled their eyes before walking on in a cloud of perfume, giggling to each other.

"What are you doin'?" hissed George.

Alex thumped Tod on the shoulder, beaming broadly. He admired the guy's bravery—he himself wouldn't so much as go within five feet of those two. Alex glanced back at George and said, "He's the man!" as though this explained everything.

"Yeah, the man," said George with a hesitant grin, looking sideways at his brother. Tod always pulled shit like that. Constant rejection had only sharpened his nose for finding trouble, and George was used to bailing him out on a regular basis.

That was what being a brother was all about, after all.

Hugging their father good bye, the boys picked up their bags and started walking up towards the gates of the airport, tailed by Alex. Mr Waggner ran after them, twisting his hands together nervously. He was a born worrier, and the idea of sending his two beloved sons off on a plane into the unknown had been a real wrench.

"You sure you got everything?" he called after them.

"Yeah, Dad. We're all set," Tod called over his shoulder, eager to get away. Good bye, parents; hello, immoral French girls!

Together they marched up the short concrete slope towards the terminal entrance, where their French teacher waited for them. Mr Murnau was a short, heavysset man in his late forties, his enthusiasm for teaching undaunted despite his many years dealing with surly teens. He waved his hands expansively as the kids swarmed up the slope towards him, like a shepherd rounding up sheep.

"Les etudiants, allons en France!" he cried, an expression of delight on his pudgy face.

Mr Waggner hung back, raising an eyebrow. "Does that mean 'go?'" he asked, amused. French had never been his strong point, but he was delighted that his two sons were doing so well.

Tod shrugged, sharing the joke. "Dunno."

Grinning, Mr Waggner pulled a folded twenty dollar bill out of his pocket and tucked it into George's shirt. "That's for both of you." He smiled and then gave his older son a crushing bear-hug. "Have a great time."

The three teens set off through the heavy, revolving glass door. Mr Waggner waved them off.

"Alex!" he called out, pointing to his sons. "You take care of 'em!"

Alex waved back. "I will!" he cheerily called over his shoulder.

The three boys disappeared inside the terminal.

Mr Waggner watched them until they were out of sight, then turned and walked back to his car. Kids grew up so fast these days. He hoped they'd all have a good time.

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Inside the airport, the students flooded up the elevators to the check-in desks, led by the indomitable figure of Mr Murnau, beaming benevolently at his flock.

Tod peered down at his passport, grimacing, as he sailed up the escalator. "I didn't think anything could look worse than my yearbook photo."

George sniffed, hiking his bag a little higher up so it wouldn't crease his red and yellow letterman's jacket. "How d'you think I feel, having to look at you all the time?"

Alex just smiled. All his worries aside, this was going to be a great trip.

As the students gathered at the top of the escalator, the PA system crackled into life. "Avis aux voyageurs..." began the announcement.

Exuberant, Mr Murnau ran around to the front of the group like an overexcited collie dog, holding up his finger.

"Entendez classe, qu'est-ce que c'est l'annonce?"

Everyone grudgingly stopped to listen as the announcement droned on. At the back of the group, Carter scowled, annoyed at the delay. His bag was heavy, packed full of hidden booze, and he just wanted to get on the plane so he could start to work out how to join the mile-high club with Terry without getting detention from Murnau. This learning French' shit was just the price he had to pay to get out of school for a couple days.

"What the fuck does *he* want?" he muttered under his breath, glaring at his beaming French teacher.

Terry just smiled, raising a sarcastic finger to her cherry-red lips. "Shhh!"

Carter rolled his eyes. He'd better get some action on this trip or he was asking for a refund.

"Vos n'êtes pas dans l'obligation de contribuer aux demandes des quémandeurs," boomed the PA, making several less-than-fluent travelers start in alarm and begin scanning their guidebooks frantically. Mr Murnau calmly scanned the group of young teens, looking for someone who could translate. The sea of blank expressions before him didn't faze him one bit—this was a new class, he told himself, so they were probably just a little shy about displaying their knowledge in public, that was all. But they would get over it in time. This real life French was exciting stuff. If his students could just get to grips with these basic announcements, the world would soon be their oyster.

Or rather, their snail. This was France they were about to visit, after all.

Mr Murnau smiled to himself at his own feeble joke and then threw his hands wide, glancing from face to face, hoping someone would answer.

Everyone kept their heads down, but after a couple of moments, Clear Rivers, a young, shy-looking girl with long brown hair answered, much to the other students' relief.

"The airport doesn't endorse solicitors," she said quietly without looking up from the book she was reading.

Everyone looked around at her. She didn't even raise her eyes from her book, *The Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller. Judging by her expression, it was far more entertaining than Mr Murnau.

Mr Murnau clapped his hands enthusiastically. "Très bien, Clear! Tout droit! C'est correct!"

Clear did not react, lost in her book again. Mr Murnau smiled in satisfaction, temporarily appeased, then motioned to his class and headed towards the departure gate. Everyone gathered up their bags and followed him.

Alex started walking towards the airport gate, tailing behind the crowd so he could once again admire the spectacular view of Blake and Christa from behind. Thus absorbed, he jumped when someone tapped on his shoulder.

He glanced around in surprise.

A pale, willowy Hare Krishna stood behind him, shaven headed and dressed in his everyday clothes. He had a white mark on his forehead and nose, making a striking contrast to his richly tanned skin. He thrust a book into Alex's hand and Alex automatically looked down at it. It was titled *Reality Beyond Matter*—the spring/summer edition of the Hare Krishna publication.

"Death is not the end," intoned the Hare Krishna, ominously.

Unsettled, Alex offered the man a wan smile. He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak, Ms Valerie Lewton, the other teacher on the trip, trotted up to him.

"It *will* be end for you if you harass my students," she warned the Krishna. She put an arm around Alex's shoulder and guided him away, herding him back in with the group. Damned whackos, she thought to herself.

"Hare Rama," muttered the Krishna nastily under his breath.

Ms Lewton turned and flashed the Krishna her biggest, brightest smile, and then cheerfully mouthed "Fuck off!"

Turning her back on him in a whirl of hair, she strode after Alex towards the terminal.

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At the check-in desk, Alex slapped down his passport and waited impatiently as his ticket was scanned and read for boarding. He felt weird; buoyed up and excited about the trip while at the same time strangely apprehensive. He put it down to nerves and his residual knuckle-headedness about flying. He tried to smile at the garishly dressed female check-in attendant as she busily typed his details into the computer. Her black hair was severely tied back in a bun, and she was wearing a loudly patterned skirt that completely failed to flatter her half decent legs. She also had way too much bright red lipstick on. Although she couldn't have been more than ten years older than him, she looked twice that.

Alex looked at her critically. At seventeen, even linoleum looked appealing to him. He shook his head, trying to snap out of it. There would be time enough for ogling girls in France.

As the check-in lady printed out his tickets, a loud *clacking* sound from behind him caught his attention. Alex turned around and peered up towards the main flight board, watching as the plastic tiles on the board clicked over and over, updating the status of flights leaving that day. He watched as his own flight—Flight 180 to Paris—came up on the board. Briefly the tiles stuck on a word: CANCELLED. Then there was a *hum* of electricity and the tiles freed themselves, changing the readout to ON TIME.

Alex stared at the departure board fretfully, a strange feeling of foreboding filling him. Could this be some kind of a message from whatever strange forces governed the universe, telling him that he shouldn't go on the flight? What if the tiles knew something he didn't? Alex chewed on the inside of his lip, considering. Perhaps the flight was meant to be cancelled, and the myriad of tiny electronic



pathways that made up the signboard's circuitry was somehow picking up ghostly signals out of the air, tuned-in to the undercurrent of the universe to give him a message from the Beyond...

"Mr Browning?"

Alex blinked and glanced back round. The check-in lady gave him a thin smile. "Have your belongings remained in your possession the entire time?" she repeated.

"Oh. Yeah," said Alex, distracted. He turned to look up at the board again, his pale blue eyes wide with worry. The letters clicked back and forth again with a second update, but the Paris flight remained unchanged.

That was probably a good sign. Behind him, the check-in attendant went on doggedly, reading from her script.

"Have you received any packages from persons unknown to you?" Alex turned back round again and sheepishly held up the *Reality Beyond Matter* book. The flight attendant smiled and made a dismissive gesture, then leaned down and fixed a new ID tag onto his baggage.

Alex peered down at it, hoping it was a lucky tag. FINAL DESTINATION: CDG, PARIS, it read.

*Final Destination.* A shiver ran through Alex. Were they deliberately trying to make him paranoid today?

"Same as your birthday," smiled the check-in lady.

"What?"

"September twenty-five. Nine twenty-five... Your birthday is the same as your departure time," she explained, looking at him as though this was the most obvious thing in the world.

Behind Alex, the departure board changed once again, a plastic wave sweeping over the rectangular tiles as the times rearranged themselves.

*Clackclackclackclackclack... clack... clack...*

Alex turned to stare as the Paris flight came up to the top of the board, flashing the gate number next to his flight... TERMINAL 1.

Terminal one, Jesus. They really oughta rename that thing, thought Alex distantly, trying not to look sick as he took his ticket from the beaming check-in lady and made his way towards the gate.

He wondered vaguely whether it was too late to cancel and go to Paris by boat instead.

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Up in the waiting area by the gate, the students swarmed around excitedly, stocking up on soft drinks and tacos before the flight. The shops nearby really had their act together when it came to marketing their assorted sugary confections to the kids; overpriced, giant chocolate-chip cookies and jumbo-sized bags of chips were stacked temptingly in full view of the waiting area. The kids buzzed back and forth, comparing purchases, while the teachers stood to one side and watched them indulgently, allowing them to let off steam before the flight, in the vague hope of actually getting some peace on board the plane.

By the main entrance, Clear Rivers wound her way past the hyperactive students and into the departure lounge, juggling a coffee, her bulky hand luggage, a Day-Glo yellow MP3 player, and an armload of guidebooks recently purchased from the airline shop. She was inwardly reeling at the price of everything at the airport as she made her way around a jock and a sorority girl, making out in the plush, blue cushioned seats of the lounge. Talk about a captive audience. She mentally resolved to bring her own sandwiches next time, or at the very least to steal something from the plush terminal restrooms, as payback.

Although the waiting area was busy, Clear seemed to carry a little bubble of peace around her as she moved through the throng of travelers and students, searching for a vacant seat. The two class princesses, Blake and Christa, sat side-by-side flipping through fashion magazines, completely blocking the aisle with their bags of high fashion duty-free purchases. Clear glanced at them sidelong through the thick curtain of her hair and smiled to herself. Forget culture. To them, this journey to Paris was one big shopping trip. The pair of them couldn't wait to get to Paris, just so they could hit the high fashion stores to buy themselves some genuine French style.

The coffee was burning her hand. Clear glanced around quickly and chose a vacant seat as far away from the two girls as she could. As she sat down, she lost her grip on her guidebooks and one of them slid to the ground, landing open and facedown on the floor. Tutting to herself, Clear put down her coffee and was bending over to pick it up when a boy's hand entered her field of vision and retrieved the book for her.

She took it without looking up, still struggling with her bags. "Thanks," she muttered, averting her eyes.

"No problem," said the boy, walking on.

Clear looked down at the book in her hand. It was open on the page it had fallen on. A grisly picture of a mangled black limo stared back up at her—a report on Princess Diana's death in Paris. The princess smiled at her from beyond the grave, a cheerful PR shot overlaid on the page in grim contrast to the scene of violent auto death behind it.

An involuntary shiver ran down Clear's spine. Her eyes flicked up along the aisle to the boy who had just handed her the book. It was Alex Browning. He was a nice guy as far as she could tell; not bad looking, and helpful and polite to the teachers in their class. He ignored her just as much as the rest of the kids, but she preferred it that way. It made things easier. She had never really talked to him before and saw no reason to start now.

Although, said a small, wicked part of her, that would've been a perfect opportunity, and you just blew it. Nice one, Clear.

Alex walked over to the observation deck and stared out at the plane, a pensive expression on his face. Outside, a distant storm was gathering. Rain lashed down in a brief squall, slicking the glass. A shiver of foreboding passed over him as he stared out at the plane that lurked just twenty feet from the glass, his gaze drawn to the enormous machine as though pulled by a magnet. It sat silent and cold, its darkened cockpit windows staring back at him like two cold, dead, and yet strangely watchful eyes.

Alex's eye traveled over the enormous gleaming shape, marveling at the size of the thing despite his apprehensions about flying on it. He could never get over how big airplanes were when you got up

close to them. You saw them up in the sky and they looked so tiny, as though you could reach out and touch them. Up close, it hit you how huge these machines really were. There was no way something that big and heavy should be able to get off the ground at all. It almost went against nature. Yet hundreds of the things took off and landed on a daily basis, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, to be held up in the air by the modern day miracles of science and engineering, and everybody took it for granted.

That was some scary shit when you really thought about it.

Alex knew that he shouldn't think about it this close to takeoff, just in case it was like that dream thing when you suddenly, consciously become aware that you're flying and then just as suddenly find that you can't do it anymore.

Instead, he tilted his head and studied the plane minutely through the glass, his paranoia kicking in again as boarding time fast approached. Close up, he was disturbed to see that the plane's paintwork was a little faded and its nose was chipped; the surface of the gunmetal gray paint was damaged in several places as though it was old or another plane had scraped it.

All of this did nothing to reassure Alex. If you unquestioningly trust your life to a piece of machinery, you wanna see that thing looking oiled and gleaming and in perfect condition. You want to see engineers in white spacesuits climbing all over it, proudly polishing it with handkerchiefs and checking every last inch of it before takeoff. If the techie guys let that thing out looking unkempt and in need of a coat of paint, who was to say what was going on inside the hood?

Alex swallowed, feeling his mouth going dry. Okay, Browning, time to stop thinking.

"Alex?" Tod bounded up to him, distracting him from his troubled thoughts. Tod pulled down his dark shades and peered over the top at Alex, like he was some kind of super secret spy. "Let's go take a shit."

Alex stared at him, curling his lip in disgust. Tod was younger than him by only a few months, but sometimes it seemed like more than that.

"Dude. Take a shit by yourself."

"No, dude, listen, okay?" Tod held up a warning finger. "Take some knowledge. We're about to board a seven-hour flight. The toilets in coach are barely ventilated closets, if that." He quickly glanced over his shoulder before leaning in closer to Alex. "Now, let's say that halfway through the flight, your body wants that airplane food out. You have to go torque a wicked cable and then right after you, like *directly* after you, walks in Christa or Blake!" Tod grimaced. "You want them to associate you with that watery sting in their eyes, that reflexive gag at the back of their throat?"

Alex considered this for about three seconds. Then he turned and obediently followed Tod towards the restrooms.

Several minutes later, Alex was starting to pull his pants up in his bathroom stall when a song came over the airport PA, tinny and echoing in the tiled men's room. It took a couple of lines for him to identify the song, and then he really, really wished that he hadn't.

It was John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High."

Alex's eyes widened as the significance of the song hit him.

"John Denver..."

He stared straight ahead at the inside of the stall door, feeling his heart give a sudden thump. "He died in a plane crash..."

The song cut out as an announcement came over the PA. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. At this time we would like to begin the pre-boarding of Volee-Air Flight 180 to Paris through gate forty-six."

With a crackle and a pop the song came back on. "*It's the Colorado Rocky Mountain High... I've seen it raining fire in the sky...*" crooned John Denver.

Alex felt the blood draining from his face.

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Ten minutes later, back at gate forty-six, Alex handed his ticket to a member of the boarding crew, trying to get his nerves under control. He felt that he should have a talk to someone official about the John Denver song. It was not a good idea to play music with any connection to aviation deaths in an airport.

Alex shivered, letting the thought go. It was just a stupid song. It didn't mean anything.

Or did it?

Come on, Browning. Get a grip.

Trying to distract himself, Alex listened with half an ear to the background noise of his class as they started to board the plane. Travelers packed around them, funneling them in towards the gate. Ms Lewton was marching back and forth in a panic, being eyed appreciatively by a group of leering jocks.

"Anyone seen Billy Hitchcock? How'd we lose him?" she called out. Her voice was lost in the buzz of conversation. Behind her, a Chinese couple was deep in a heated discussion with an airline clerk about their seats, their conversation slipping confusingly back and forth between French and Chinese. Students jostled and laughed as Mr Murnau attempted to count them.

"Vingt-huit, vingt-neuf..."

Alex shook his head, focusing in on Mr Murnau. The guy was incorrigible, and it was only due to Ms Lewton, his English teacher, that he knew that word. He wondered if Mr Murnau dreamed in French, too. He wouldn't be at all surprised.

. The line of students finally got their collective acts together and obediently moved forward en masse towards the boarding ramp. Alex reluctantly tailed after them, dragging his feet, and moving slower the closer he got to the ramp. His mind raced and he found that he was starting to come up with excuses so he wouldn't have to board the plane. Something just felt wrong. He could feel it in his gut. He knew that pretty much everyone freaked out about flying, but this was something different. A long buried part of his brain cried out that he was in danger: that something was up with the plane, that if he didn't turn around right now he would be in peril. Alex swallowed and glanced fitfully behind him, thinking how easy it would be to give the teachers some pathetic excuse and then just walk back the way he had come, down the escalators and out through the front door, to freedom.

It was too late now. It was his turn to board.

The sounds of the bustling airport faded into the background as Alex handed his passport and boarding card to the waiting attendant, then walked through the gate and approached the boarding ramp. He paused briefly, staring down the darkened corridor on the other side of the gate. The darkness of the tunnel hypnotized him, and he felt a weird yawning sensation in the pit of his stomach that may or may not have been caused by the double chili-cheeseburger he'd just eaten.

Blake and Christa brushed by Alex, gaily swinging their hair. Any other time, Alex would've grabbed the opportunity to sneak a glance at their backsides, which were barely covered by their tiny blue miniskirts, but on this occasion he hardly registered the two girls. A light sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead as he set a foot inside the door and peered down the corridor, which seemed to stretch forward into a fuzzy, gray carpeted infinity. Once he walked down that ramp, he knew that there was no turning back. The lights overhead *fizzed* and *crackled*, throwing the far end of the hallway into darkness as though the carpeted corridor led to nothing but a black, endless abyss...

Alex jumped as someone thumped him on the back. It was Tod. His friend laughed, amused at his reticence.

"Dude, *go*," he said.

Alex shot Tod a warning look, trying to ignore the thumping of his heart, and then he unwillingly stepped onto the passenger ramp and set off down the corridor. It was just a short walk, but he felt like a condemned man walking to the gallows.

The two friends marched down the corridor together, Alex looking pale, worried; Tod striding confidently down the hall as though he owned the place. As they walked, Tod leaned forward to whisper in Alex's ear.

"Dude, I worked the ticket clerk so you're sitting next to Christa and I'm next to lake." Tod grinned, eyeing up the two girls in front of them. "That's seven hours and most of it's in the dark. Dude, if we can't get something goin' on this flight, we should just put ourselves out of our fuckin' misery."

Alex just smiled. The guy was kidding himself. Christa and Blake were so out of their league it wasn't even funny.

But still, seven hours...

At the end of the ramp was a seething mass of students as everyone became bottlenecked at the point of entering the plane. Alex turned and glanced nervously out of the reinforced plastic porthole. It was still raining outside, the gray water rushing down the window and blurring the twinkling orange sodium lights of the distant town. Black bellied thunderclouds hung heavily in the sky, and as he watched, a flash of ghostly lightning lit up the scene, earthing itself on the ground in the distance behind the enormous silver wing of the plane with its dangling car-sized engine. White light washed over the window, and Alex pulled the hem of his white T-shirt away from his neck. He was sweating, and felt uncomfortably warm and claustrophobic.

Lightning... great, he thought. Why don't you give me a crack of thunder and be done with it?

Obediently, thunder briefly crunched in the distant sky.

Thanks, world, thought Alex sourly.

Then he nearly jumped out of his skin as Tod hit him in the back again, urging him onwards. "Go!"

Without hesitation, Alex turned and thumped Tod solidly on the arm.

"Ow! Ow, that hurt!" protested Tod, but he was grinning as he said it. What was the dude's deal? He was acting weird, or rather, weirder than usual. If he found out that Alex was afraid to fly, he was gonna have so much fun with him on this trip...

Alex tightened his jaw and walked on, swept forward by the tide of bodies, then once again he paused by the doorway of the plane. His gaze was drawn to the metal hull of the plane, visible around the edge of the boarding corridor. A bold white line ran through the uniform blue paint; a tiny portion of the giant Volee-Air logo painted on the side of the plane. Alex saw that the side of the loading door was badly scraped, the dull gray metal of the plane showing through the paint in several places.

Jeez, the whole thing was in need of a paint job!



That did not bode well.

A female flight attendant beamed at Alex, welcoming him on board. Alex gave her a sickly smile in return and then peered down the gap between the passenger ramp and the plane. A dizzying drop was revealed; twenty feet of nothingness before you hit the wet concrete beneath the plane. As he watched, a luggage loading cart passed underneath him, three nines in red emblazoned on the roof of the vehicle. Seen from above and upside down, the number carried quite a different connotation.

Alex gulped.

There was no going back now.

Alex took a deep breath, cautiously stepped over the six-inch gap and boarded the plane.

Inside the plane, the air was stale and cloyingly musty, tinged with the smells of old cooked meals, recycled air and duty-free perfume. Alex silently followed Tod through the elegant spaciousness of the first class section, where businessmen reclined in comfort with their individual TV screens and complimentary glasses of wine, and stepped through a blue curtain veiling off passenger hell.

The coach section was packed, overflowing with a seething mass of humanity, jostling each other in a bid to find their seats and stow their luggage while everyone else waited impatiently to get past them. The seats were packed closely together with little regard for the fact that passengers actually had legs, the worn and dilapidated-looking seats sparking fresh worries about the safety of the aircraft in Alex's mind. The raucous cry of a newborn baby hit his ears as he moved further down the car. Great. That was the last thing he needed. Alex glanced towards the baby with a wince, hoping that the mother would try to keep it quiet on the plane. As he watched, the newborn turned its head and waved its tiny fingers blindly at him, screwing up its face in the boiled monkey expression of newborns everywhere.

Tod pulled a face of despair on seeing the baby, but behind him, George nodded thoughtfully towards it.

"Good sign. The younger, the better. It would be a fucked-up god to take down *this* plane."

Alex glanced up at George. He hadn't been aware that George was a nervous flier too. He guessed everyone felt the same about flying, which was kind of comforting.

The three friends walked onwards, scanning the aisles for their seats. A few steps further along they saw a young man sitting beside the emergency exit, his body thrown back in the awkward posture of someone suffering from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. A cannula was plugged into his nostrils and connected to an oxygen tank, which was being held by his mother who sat patiently beside him.

George leaned forward and whispered into Alex's ear as he gave the man a sympathetic glance. "A *really* fucked-up god."

Alex carried on past the man and quickly found his seat—aisle nine, seat twenty-five. There was nobody sitting there yet; no Christa. He glanced down the plane to where Tod was squeezing in past Blake with a look of triumph on his face.

"Hi Tod," she greeted him with a smile.

She knows his name, thought Alex sourly. He wondered vaguely if Christa knew his. Somehow, he doubted it.

Dumping his bag down, Alex collapsed into his seat, glad to be finally sitting down. His legs were shaking and he quickly reached down behind him fastened his seat belt, pulling it extra tight for reassurance. Then he closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. Since he had stepped onto the plane, his heart had been racing like a clapped-out greyhound. His logical mind knew that there was no reason for him to be this stressed about the flight. After all, hundreds of these aircraft took off every day. It had been a long time since that last big airplane disaster, and hopefully security and safety had been tightened up since then.

Hopefully...

Sweat ran down into Alex's eyes and he wiped at them fitfully. It was uncomfortably warm on the plane. Flicking his eyes open, he reached up and fiddled with the A/C knob above his seat. There was a muted *hiss* and cool air streamed down onto his face. He took a deep lungful of the stale air and tried to calm down, rolling his head towards the window to check out the view. Rain pattered down the

window next to his head, and the distant flickers of lightning from the rising storm did nothing to ease his nerves.

Everything was fine. *Really*. This time tomorrow he would be in France and all of this would be behind him.

Several aisles down, Tod had hit the first snag in his whole "sitting-next-to-Blake" plan. The two girls had sat down together, ignoring the numbers on their tickets, and were now steadfastly refusing to move. They whispered to one another, shooting sharp glances at Tod that were none too friendly. Finally, Blake turned to him, offering a pristine-white smile.

"Er, could you switch seats with Christa?" she asked him coyly.

Tod glanced down at his ticket, stalling for time. So much for his grand plans...

"Er, I would, but I got a bladder thing," he said meekly, bullshitting for his country. "It's a... er, urinary tract infection."

The girls looked at one another and rolled their eyes. Christa pulled a pained face as she realized that she'd have to move, and then got huffily up to her feet again with none of the civility her friend had shown.

"Let's go ask Alex," she said snottily.

Together, the two sorority girls started off down the aisle.

Tod swore to himself. What were they, joined at the hip or something?

Meanwhile, Alex was still preoccupied with his worries about the safety of the plane. He stared owlishly out of the side window, trying to shake the feeling that he needed to get off this aircraft, right now. Outside, the dark shape of the huge wing loomed beneath him, and after a moment, a strange mechanical whirring made him look downwards. Alex watched as the wing flaps extended, their servos whining shrilly as they ran through their range of operations. As they did so, lightning flashed again, revealing the wing in a single frame of perfect vision.

Alex drew back from the window with a grimace, horrified. The wing was dirty, with great long streaks of black oil running down over the ailerons, as the rain washed the accumulated dirt out of the

crevices of the wing. Seen from above, the oil almost looked like dark blood pouring down the wing...

"Alex?"

Alex blinked and looked up to see Christa standing over him, a vision in blue. She gazed down at him coyly, her face lit up by a glowing smile. Blake stood beside her, beaming down at him and really working the sex appeal.

Despite his distracted frame of mind, Alex found himself starting to smile. Had Blake and Christa both come to sit with him? Wow. Finally, the trip was beginning to look up.

Christa leaned in closer to Alex—so close that he could smell the sickly sweet perfume she wore. She gazed deeply into Alex's eyes with a soft smile on her full, luscious lips.

"Could you trade seats with Blake so that she and I can sit together?" she asked without changing expression. "She asked Tod, but he says he's got some sorta medical thing."

Alex's face fell.

His eyes flicked back down the aisle to Tod who shook his head frantically *no*, then drew his hand sharply across his neck and mimed throwing a noose over his own head.

Clown.

Alex looked back up at Christa who gave him her best helpless-little-girl look and batted her eyelashes at him. "Please?" she simpered. Beside her, Blake smiled down at him radiantly, blowtorching his will with her beauty.

Alex felt his determination melting in the face of such concentrated cuteness. He hesitated, then shrugged offhandedly, knowing he was hopelessly outmatched.

"Sure."

Down the aisle, Tod threw up his hands in disgust and turned around with a flounce.

"Thanks Alex, you're so sweet," gushed Christa as Alex unbuckled his seatbelt and hauled himself up. They cooed and gushed over him as he picked up his bag and squeezed past, all touchy-feely grateful, but Alex knew they just did this because they knew guys dug it.

Heaven help the poor guy who thought he was being singled out for special attention.

Sighing, he made his way down the aisle to Tod, who grumpily mouthed "Fag!" at him. Grumbling, Alex climbed past Tod and flopped into the empty window seat next to him.

"Did you really think we were gonna tittie-fuck 'em over Greenland or something?" he asked wryly.

As though in reply, his tray table spun loose of its catch and clunked down onto his lap. Alex pushed it upright with a sigh and reached for the catch.

Tod eyeballed him, glowering, his plans of sexual conquest having been dashed away by his best friend. The dude had *no* idea.

"Y'know, because of you, I gotta sit here and watch..." Tod thumbed his in-flight entertainment guide open and his expression darkened further. "Fucking *Stewart Little*."

Alex's tray table fell down again with a clunk as the metal screw catch came off in his hand. He jumped.

"Thank you," said Tod gracelessly. "Thanks, man, that's great." He slumped down in his seat.

Alex wasn't listening. He stared down at the broken catch in his hand and his pulse started racing again. The whole plane was falling apart! Ignoring Tod, who was muttering to himself under his breath, Alex reached up and surreptitiously punched the orange flight attendant call button. That catch needed to be fixed before they started their flight. Last thing he wanted was to get decapitated by a flying tray table upon takeoff. That would not be a good start to his trip.

Sweating, Alex glanced up as Billy Hitchcock stumbled onto the plane, clutching an enormous bag of popcorn, looking lost, and apologizing to all and sundry for being late. The flight attendant gave him a testy look and pointed him to a vacant seat. He made his way around Carter and Terry, who were busy making out in the center aisle, and squeezed into his seat.

Nobody came to answer Alex's call.

Alex sat back in his seat and tried to think happy thoughts.

Moments later, the aircraft engines started up with a whine, and the flight attendants made their way down to their seats to prepare for takeoff. The "Fasten Seatbelts" sign came on with a *ping* and a babble of pre-recorded safety instructions came over the PA.

Alex glanced down at the safety card in the seat pocket in front of him and then peered down the aisle, hoping an attendant would come and take care of his tray table quickly. When the lights in the cabin dimmed to prepare for takeoff, Alex realized he would just have to put up with it.

He slumped back in his seat feeling totally, horribly helpless. He breathed in through his mouth, trying to take in enough oxygen to calm himself. The air in the cabin was stale and lifeless, and Alex found himself starting to hyperventilate. There was no air! He felt himself grow light-headed and queasy. He hoped that he wasn't about to throw up. If anyone cute saw him, that would be bad.

He quickly glanced over his shoulder to see who was sitting behind him. Two boys whose names momentarily escaped him sat staring at their inflight entertainment guides, and beside them sat that weird girl with the funny name—what was it? Clear Rivers? Whoever she was, she was sitting behind him with her yellow MP3 player headphones over her ears.

Strange girl. Kind of quiet.

Alex turned back around and mutely glanced at Tod for reassurance. His friend steadfastly ignored him—boy, he would be paying for that one for a while—and then sat back in his seat with a pained expression on his face. Moments later, the main door was slammed with a solid-sounding *clunk*, and the jet began rolling forward towards the runway.

Alex clenched his fists in his lap. He wasn't looking forward to this.

The whine of the engine increased in pitch and volume as the jumbo jet began to taxi into takeoff position. Alex sat back, pressing himself down into his seat as the tray table flopped into his lap once again. Goddammit! He left it where it was and tried to ignore it, staring tensely out of the window as they rolled away from the bright, friendly lights of the terminal and headed out into the blackness of the airstrip. A movement below him caught his attention and he

watched as the dirty, streaked wing flaps extended and settled into position with an alarming *creak*.

Alex swallowed, trying to shake the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was just dirt. The wings were fine. They wouldn't let the plane fly if it wasn't fine.

Right?

The cabin jolted once, briefly, as the tires rolled into position on the asphalt. Next, the dual turbine engines kicked in, whirring up the scale in a high-pitched howl of rotors. The jet began accelerating down the runway, bumping and rattling, the g-force pressing the passengers back into their seats. Lights and buildings streaked past the windows and the engines built up a scream as they prepared to lift two hundred tons of cold steel and thirty-thousand pounds of human flesh up into the air. The cabin tilted backwards as the wheels left the ground and the aircraft began climbing up into the sky.

This was it.

The cabin lights dimmed and flickered, and Alex sucked in his breath, a distressed look on his face. He just wanted this bit of the flight to be over and done with. Impatiently, he glanced out of the side window and watched the world rush past at a forty-five degree angle as the aircraft swiftly climbed up into the darkened night sky. Within moments, the airport terminal was nothing but a hazy collection of bright orange lights way down below on the ground. The horizon spread out around them; a black, inky void filled with pinpricks of light and the winding rows of streetlights marking out the roads.

"Attention! Votre voyage est sur le point de commencer!" cried Mr Murnau from the front of the cabin. He waved his hands in the air like an excited fan at a ball game, and the students around him joined in with rather more sarcasm than their teacher would allow himself to notice, sending a Mexican wave of hands rippling down the cabin. A couple of other holidaymakers joined in good humoredly, caught up in the infectious excitement of takeoff. The students broke into spontaneous applause as the aircraft continued to climb.

The trip was now well and truly underway.

"Alright!" Tod clapped enthusiastically then glanced sideways at Alex who had totally failed to join in with the applause. He grinned at his mute friend, who completely ignored him. Jeez, what was his deal? The dude was sitting back in his seat, clinging onto his armrests like a baby, and looking as though he'd just downed ten cans of beer and a rancid lamb vindaloo. Judging by the sick look on his face, he was about to barf or something.

Tod sighed. Instead of spending his journey with the beautiful, caring and eminently screwable figure of Blake, he was gonna spend it sitting next to Mr Blow Chunks.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Tod glanced down to check that there were enough sick bags in the seat pocket and then hunkered down moodily into his seat. That *Stuart Little* film was looking kinda good to him right now.

Alex tried to breathe deeply, praying for the journey to be over soon. The engines screamed in his ear, and the raucous cheering and laughter was so at odds with his dark mood that it was actually giving him a headache. He glanced fitfully across the aisle in irritation. Students were chattering animatedly: talking, laughing, leafing through magazines and flicking channels on their radio headsets. Billy Hitchcock sat opposite him on the other side of the aisle, carelessly stuffing popcorn into his mouth; chewing messily and gazing idly out of the window as though he were at the cinema rather than on a decrepit aircraft that was hurtling him through the air at three hundred miles per hour.

Oh crap, they were in the air now.

There truly was no going back.

The thought did Alex no good and he squeezed his eyes tight shut, praying for all this to be over soon. In a few short hours he would be off this plane, sitting in a delightfully quaint little restaurant somewhere pretty, while beautiful French babes swarmed around him, pouring him wine and attending to his every need.

Mmm, French girls.

The cabin tilted even further back with a mechanical *hum*, pressing Alex back in his seat, and then the plane seemed to bounce around a little as it hit a patch of turbulence. The sensation hit Alex



right in the pit of his stomach, and he tightened his grip on the armrests to quell the fluttering in his belly.

It was just turbulence. Everything was fine. Everything was normal.

A couple of rows further down, Carter took hold of Terry's hand as if to reassure her about the turbulence.

"Yeah, whatever," he informed the cabin in general, looking bored. Terry looked at him sideways. He was squeezing her hand so tightly it actually hurt. She shrugged to herself and went back to studying the cosmetics section of the duty-free magazine.

Ohh, they had that Mac lipstick she liked on sale.

The turbulence continued as the plane climbed higher into the sky. The overhead compartments began rattling as the bouncing became more severe, and from the back, a young girl gave a little cry of fear as the plane jolted around. The students' chattering died away to be replaced by a tense silence as everybody held on tightly, waiting for the turbulence to pass. Everyone knew it was just turbulence, but still, it was never fun to be bounced around when you were thousands of feet in the sky.

As the shaking increased, Mr Murnau glanced over to the cabin steward, a question on his face. The steward smiled reassuringly, giving him a little "it's okay" sign with his thumb and forefinger. He dealt with this kind of thing all the time and knew it was just a moderate updraft from the water as they passed over the sea. It was nothing to worry about.

Mr Murnau sat back in his seat, trying to relax.

A moment later, the bouncing stopped and the plane started to level out. The "Fasten Seatbelts" sign pinged off. Alex let out his breath in a rush, and relaxed his grip on the armrests, looking over at Tod.

Thank Christ for that.

His friend gave him an amused look, teasing him for his worry. Behind him, a ripple of relieved laughter ran down the plane, and a buzz of excited conversation rose as the students relaxed.

The lights went out. Before anyone could react, the entire cabin pitched sharply to the right with an oscillating whine, tilting the floor

to a crazy—five degree angle. There was a sudden lurch and the whole cabin started shaking around wildly, listing heavily to one side. The muted whine of the engines filled the air, and the cabin banged and rocked as though it were being sharply buffeted by giant invisible blows.

Alex's eyes flew open and he stared around in horror.

This wasn't normal.

Oh, fuck!

He clung onto the seat rests, hyperventilating, staring around in fear as the plane pitched even further to the side, sending unrestrained personal belongings tumbling across the heads of the passengers. The whole compartment began bouncing up and down violently, the seats and fittings clacking and banging. Overhead lockers swung open as their magnetic locks were disengaged by gravity, spewing baggage into the aisles. Alex felt the seatbelt tighten around his waist, holding him down as the cabin tilted even further to the side. He held on for dear life as he slid towards Tod, yelping in fear. Overhead, the call buttons flashed orange and then shorted out with a *fizz*. A moment later there was a *hiss* of pressurized air and yellow oxygen masks deployed out of the ceiling and tumbled down towards him. At the same time, a light came on overhead and an eerily calm recorded voice came over the PA sounding as though it had been recorded in the fifties by an English school teacher.

"Fasten seat belts. Please put on oxygen masks..."

Everyone made a determined grab for the wildly swinging masks as they whipped back and forth with the pitching of the cabin, struggling to catch hold of their masks while simultaneously being bombarded by falling luggage. They had all seen the airplane safety presentations umpteen times and they knew what to do.

This didn't look like the calm, sedate emergency procedure shown countless times on the aircraft safety video. This was complete and utter bedlam.

The shaking got worse. Alex clutched his bag tightly to his chest as chaos unfolded around him. This wasn't supposed to happen! He *knew* he shouldn't have gotten on this plane! Why hadn't he got off when he had the chance? He had been standing there in the terminal

—damn that word!—just fifteen short minutes ago. All it would've taken was for him to turn around and just start walking and he would've been safe.

But it was too late for that now.

Alex's heart hammered wildly in his chest as the cabin bounced up and down, left and right, lifting and dropping as the sound of the engines got even louder. His stomach lurched and he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, helpless to do anything but pray that the pilot would get them through this, that it was just a minor technical fault, that this happened all the time and the guidance computer would correct the problem at any moment. They were in safe hands, right? A couple more seconds and the pilot would right the plane, and they would just have to go back to the airport and transfer onto a different plane, that would get them safely on their way to Paris, while they checked this hunk of junk and found whatever tiny screw had come loose.

Boy, would he have a funny story to tell his dad when he finally got home—

Oh, crap! What was that?

Alex listened fearfully as a terrible sound filled the air—the noise of tearing metal as the cabin twisted under extreme pressure. Then the sound Alex most dreaded.

*Silence.*

The thunder of the right engine abruptly cut out with a *bang*, to be replaced by a grinding whine that quickly tailed off into nothing as the engine spooled to a halt. At the same time, the opposite engine's roar became a bellow as the turbines tried to keep the plane up to speed on a single engine.

It failed.

The plane tilted fully ninety degrees to the right, then swung wildly back in the opposite direction as the stricken engine cut in and out, trying again and again to restart. The lights flickered off and on madly, and screams filled the air as passengers were pitched around in their seats. Loose luggage flew back and forth across the cabin, striking the students and bouncing off the walls, the floor and the ceiling. The disabled man's mother clutched her son to her as he

howled in panic, uncomprehending, and further on down the aircraft, the newborn baby screamed.

A low-pitched hissing sound cut through the hubbub, almost as if the aircraft were snarling, and Alex realized that the cabin must be somehow decompressing. Panic hit him full force, but he tried to fight it, remembering the safety video. He grabbed a dangling oxygen mask with a mad burst of effort and strapped it to his face with fumbling fingers, then braced himself up in his seat and stared out of the jolting porthole window, his face a rictus of terror.

The horizon was at an angle of forty-five degrees, wheeling past in a slow, sick spin. The bright lights of the airport were still visible, way down on the spinning ground, glowing brightly as though taunting him.

Right away, Alex realized what this meant.

The aircraft was out of control.

Alex's mind shut down. A white blanket of fear filled his brain as he watched the overhead control panels blow out, raining showers of dirty yellow sparks onto the heads of the helpless passengers.

This couldn't really be happening. It had to be a dream. It had to b

—

*KA-BOOOM!*

Alex jumped and spun around as a massive ripped across the cabin, blasting a ten-foot hole in the fuselage. Metal and people shrieked as the craft and passengers were torn to shreds. Red liquid sprayed outwards like a sick firework, spattering the walls and ceiling, and Alex realized with a shock that it was human blood. The explosion left a blackened hole in the side of the cabin, and the plane decompressed in an instant. A tornado of escaping air screamed through the compartment, sucking up every unrestrained object in its path and flinging it towards the hole: paper, books, luggage, bodies.

The pressure was too much—something had to give. With a sickening *screech* of tearing metal, the side of the plane tore away as though opened up by a giant can opener. The night landscape was suddenly, shockingly revealed; the pretty twinkling lights on the

horizon dipping and wheeling around them sickeningly, while above them, the night sky glittered.

Alex wasn't looking at the view.

He was far too busy screaming.

A *squeal* of metal filled the air as the seats nearest the gaping hole in the side of the plane started to tear free of their metal moorings, dragged outwards by the intense release of pressure.

*Kkkkrrrrrrrrrrrr... KLUNG!*

An entire rack of seats slid sideways then jammed at the very edge of the ten-foot wide hole. Piercing screams rang out as the students in the seats frantically tried to get their seatbelts off, screaming for somebody, anybody, to help them.

They weren't quick enough.

The first row of seats vanished out of the side of the plane in a blaze of white sparks and a tangle of trailing cables, taking the students with them. The passengers in the second row shrieked, unable to see or hear amid the howling wind, bombarded by flying debris, hanging on mindlessly as their own seats were ripped out of the floor and dragged towards the hole.

In the center aisle, a blood spattered Ms Lewton gathered her wits and flung out her hand towards the student in the seat closest to her; a pretty girl in her late teens named Lucy. Lucy was one of her favorite students from English Lit; she was always ready with a quick quip or a warm smile. Right now, Lucy was screaming for her life as she was dragged closer and closer to the gaping abyss outside the airplane, still buckled tightly into her seat, her blonde hair flying around her in the howling gale.

Ms Lewton stretched out her hand, yelling out to Lucy to grab on, but her voice was whipped away by the wind. The young student reached out for her teacher, tears of mindless terror streaming down her face, but her outflung fingers were too far away. The metal seat joists began to give out and she was yanked three feet further away with a jolt, then another, then another, as though fate were toying with her. Then the metal legs of the seat collapsed as they were torn free of their mounts.

Lucy was dragged screaming out of the aircraft.

Three rows back, Alex desperately tried to focus, to shut out the terror and the panic and the screaming, and to put all his brainpower into saving his own life. There had to be something he could do. His mind balked at the thought that they were all about to die and that there was no hope. There *had* to be hope.

C'mon, think!

Didn't aircraft carry parachutes for a situation like this? He tried to remember the safety instruction video, looking quickly around him for where his parachute might be stashed.

Then he realized something.

Those were lifejackets, weren't they?

What good was a lifejacket when you were about to get sucked out of a burning plane? The absurdity of it all hit Alex and he yelled out in frustration, thumping the seat beside him.

As he did so, the pitch of the one remaining engine suddenly shot up the scale in a hissing, accelerating scream. Students clapped their hands over their ears in pain as the sound intensified, filling the confined space like a sonic tsunami as—

**WHOOOMPHHH!!!**

A massive jet of fire belched out of the exposed right engine as the turbine blew up, unable to cope with the strain of keeping the two hundred ton jet up in the air by itself. Fire washed into the hole in the side of the plane, torching the nearest rows of passengers in a rush of shockingly bright flame. Alex turned his head away from the immense blast of heat, and then looked back, unable to tear his eyes away. Dead students sat lifeless in their seats, their skin and clothing blackened, blood and gore oozing. A moment later an ear splitting rush of sound bellowed in through the hole like the howling winds of hell.

Then the world flipped over as the aircraft dived downwards and dropped out of the sky like a stone.

Inside the cabin, everything fell forward. Lug. gage flew overhead, and those who had managed to get their belts off flew end-over-end, rolling over the tops of the seats in a cartwheel of limbs. A screaming man tumbled down the aisle as though falling off a cliff, and smacked into the disintegrating end wall with a wet and final *thud*. The

strangely familiar, sick sound of an aircraft going down filled the air, drowning out the cruelly hopeless screams of the one hundred and ninety passengers on board.

Alex cried out in terror while hanging facedown in his seat, as if he were taking a nosedive on the world's sickest roller coaster. His mind went into overdrive as he realized that this really was the end. He was going to die because some stupid teacher had wanted to take him on some stupid French trip, on some stupid fucking plane that should've been serviced one hundred thousand miles ago, and he was too fucking stupid to listen to his instincts and get off the damn thing while he had the chance.

So this was it.

He was about to die.

Alex hoped fervently that it wouldn't hurt.

*BLAM!!* The overhead lights exploded, throwing the cabin into pitch darkness. Alex blinked, fighting to see as the rushing wind blurred his vision. A moment later, he saw something very bad indeed. A wall of mushrooming flame was rolling up the cabin in a blaze of obscene light, engulfing everything in its path.

Then there was nothing left for Alex to do but scream, as fire, wind and blood whipped across him, around him, blistering and boiling his skin off in an agonizing rush, before blasting the deep-fried flesh off his very bones and leaving behind nothing but a melted, charred, still-screaming skeleton.

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"Alex?"

Alex gasped. His eyes flew open in shock, his pupils dilating rapidly as the undiluted horror of his own death flooded over him. He threw his hands out and violently started up in his seat, sickeningly disoriented, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

He was sitting aboard the aircraft surrounded by chatting students. The lights were on and glowing warmly throughout the brightly-lit cabin. Carter and Terry were making out in their seats in the center aisle.

Alex blinked rapidly, his heart pounding so loudly that the sound seemed to echo round the whole cabin. His eyes darted about, searching for some evidence of the catastrophe.

There was none.

Everything was normal again.

The aircraft wasn't exploding.

He wasn't dead.

What the hell was going on?

"Alex?"

Alex looked up with a jolt to see Christa standing over him, a vision in blue. She gazed down at him coyly, her face lit up by a glowing smile. Blake stood beside her, beaming down at him and really working the sex appeal.

"Could you trade seats with Blake so that she and I can sit together?" Christa asked.

Alex's face froze.

"She asked Tod, but he says he's got some sorta medical thing."

Alex's eyes flicked back down the aisle to Tod who shook his head frantically *no*, then drew his hand sharply across his neck and mimed throwing a noose over his own head.

Alex looked back up at Christa who gave him her best helpless-little-girl look and batted her eyelashes at him. "Please?"

Sweat ran down Alex's forehead. He started up in his seat, wide-eyed and trembling, then grabbed his bag with an overload of adrenaline and shoved his way past the two startled girls, making a violent bolt for the aisle. The world spun around him as the blood rushed to his head, and his eyes flicked frantically right and left before settling on the familiar shape of Tod.

Tod!

Darting down the aisle, Alex stopped in front of Tod and stared down at him, pale-faced and shaking. Everyone nearby turned to stare at him, surprised by the sudden commotion. Tod looked up, a little startled at his friend's wild expression.

"Dude. What's up?"

Without a word, Alex vaulted over Tod into the vacant seat beside him. As he landed in the seat, the tray table flopped down into his



lap.

Fuck!

Alex pushed it back up again in a frenzy. His fumbling fingers found the catch and twisted it shut.

The catch broke off in his hand.

Alex held the broken catch up in front of his face and stared at it, white as a sheet. He started to hyperventilate.

"Is there a problem, sir?"

Alex looked up, trembling. A floppy-haired, male flight attendant stood over him, a concerned look on his freshly shaven face.

Behind him, a dozen eyes met his as the students in the center aisle stared at him flatly, grateful for the entertainment. Dude was having some kind of panic attack. What a freak.

Alex looked up at the attendant, wild-eyed with shock, unable to form words. Across the aisle, Carter leaned forward and sneered at him.

"What's your fuckin' problem?" he snapped.

Sensing trouble, Mr Murnau and Ms Lewton unbuckled themselves from their seats and strode towards Alex.

Mr Murnau leaned over him, his bushy eyebrows raised quizzically. "Alex? Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

Alex opened his mouth to reply when something caught his eye. The window... The airport terminal lights...

The ground...

Alex stared. The plane was on the ground! They hadn't taken off yet!

This was it—this was his chance to escape!

A firework went off in Alex's head as adrenaline rushed through him. He exploded into action, leaping bodily over Tod and landing heavily in the aisle. His panicked gaze flicked left and right, searching for a way out.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"This fuckin' plane's gonna explode!" he shouted.

A deathly silence fell over the packed cabin. Every single passenger swiveled in his or her seat to look at Alex. They were minutes from

departure. This was not something they wanted to hear right now, or indeed, ever.

Wincing, the flight attendant turned to his coworkers, signaling for assistance with a quick gesture. Behind him, three stewards began hurrying down the aisle.

The students were not amused either. Carter rose to his feet, a scowl swamping his face.

"Shut up, Browning!" he cried. If this little dickweed did anything to jeopardize his long awaited trip, he was so beating the crap outta him.

"Yeah. You're not funny, Alex!" Terry added with a glare.

The male flight attendant held up his hands, hoping to pacify the raving teen. "Sir, if this is your idea of a joke, we do not tolerate such humor."

"It's not a joke! It's not a joke!" yelled Alex hysterically, wide-eyed with panic. He *had* to get off the plane.

Tod jumped up and grabbed Alex by the arm. "Alex! Take it easy!"

Carter stood up and pushed his way past Terry into the aisle. "Sit down, Browning!"

"Listen to me!" Alex yelled. "This plane's gonna explode on takeoff!"

That did it. The temperature dropped in the cabin by about ten degrees and the flight attendant's face turned to stone.

"Sir, we'll remove you from this aircraft if this continues," he said primly.

"*I'll* remove him!" shouted Carter nastily, shoving his way out of his seat.

"Fuck that! I'll remove myself!" gasped Alex. He turned to bolt down the aisle as fast as he could, only to find his way blocked by Carter. Behind Carter stood Mr Murnau and several flight attendants, effectively jamming the aisle. Alex started pushing and shoving at them in a panic, frantic to get past them. He had to get out, *right now*. If they shut the gate to the aircraft, he would be trapped on the plane.

Furious at the disruption of his pre-European smooch-fest, Carter shoved Alex back down the aisle and then punched him solidly in the

face. Alex collapsed backwards as Tod got up behind him, knocking his friend back into his seat. He scrambled to his feet and renewed his efforts to get to the exit.

Carter lunged for him again and then gave a yell as two burly arms enfolded him in an expert choke hold. Behind him, a beefy copilot tightened his hold and began dragging Carter back towards the exit. Beside himself with rage, Carter slammed an elbow backwards, burying it in the copilot's stomach, but the guy didn't so much as flinch.

Not to be outdone, Terry jumped up and started beating at the copilot with her handbag, trying to get him to release her boyfriend.

"He didn't do nothing!" she yelled.

Passengers turned to watch as the aisle erupted in a riot of pushing and shoving: Alex trying to get out, Carter trying to get to Alex, Mr Murnau trying to get to them both to separate them. The copilot managed to drag Carter all the way to the exit door, but found his way blocked by two late arrivals in the form of Billy Hitchcock and his enormous bag. Exasperated, he tried to shove his way past the young teen and got stuck in the doorway of the coach cabin.

There was complete and utter chaos.

The flight attendant decided he'd had enough. The passengers were freaking out and he wasn't getting paid enough to deal with this shit. "Anyone in the aisle is off the plane!" he bellowed.

"No, wait, I was late... That's my seat right over there," whimpered Billy, pointing.

Everybody ignored him.

The mass of combatants surged down the aisle, spilling out into the first class cabin, where they were herded straight towards the main door. Mr Murnau and Ms Lewton shared a worried look and shook their heads in disappointment. What a start to their long awaited French trip!

"Everybody stay where you are! Just sit tight!" Ms Lewton called to the rest of the class before turning to leave the plane.

"Sit tight? The fucking plane's gonna explode!" Alex yelled at her as he vanished through the door.

A brittle silence fell over the cabin. Forty pale, worried faces peered after Alex.

As the sounds of the struggle diminished into the distance, Tod sat back in his seat and shook his head in amazement, concerned for his friend. He had no idea that Alex was that badly affected by flying. Dude must have smoked some serious drugs for him to be this strung out. He glanced anxiously over at his brother, an unspoken question on his face.

"Go check him out, see how he's doing," said George kindly.

Relieved, Tod jumped to his feet and hared off down the aisle after his friend.

In the seat behind him, Clear Rivers watched Tod run off the plane, wide-eyed. Alex's words rang in her ears and a cold chill of foreboding passed over her. Her breathing sped up and she leaned forward in her seat to watch him go. She hardly knew Alex ,but she had the weirdest feeling that she should take heed of his warning. Something in his voice hit a very raw, primitive part of her brain, and she knew instinctively that he was telling the truth, or at least he thought that he was telling the truth.

If he said the plane was going to explode, then shouldn't she get off, just in case?

Making a snap decision, Clear quickly unbuckled her seatbelt, grabbed her bag and stood up, pushing past the girl sitting beside her towards the aisle. Ignoring the stares of the other students, she hurried off after Tod.

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Inside the terminal building itself, Celia Jennings was having a bad day. The security guard had only been working the evening shift for two weeks, and already she was missing the quiet and refuge of the graveyard shift. In a place like this, you dealt with some serious nutcases, no matter what shift you got put on, but taking the two am to ten am shift generally meant that you had fewer crazies to deal with. Strangely enough, the people you would expect to go ballistic on a plane or in the airport weren't the kind you'd expect—the soccer

fans, the teenagers, the skinheads—but rather the upper end of the market, like the businessmen in their starched suits, the managers, and the overstressed executives to whom a half-hour delay meant a missed connection in Brazil and a supersized temper tantrum in the flight information line.

Celia was used to dealing with crazies, but the voice coming over her wireless headset was worrying her. She had just been told that some kid on a school trip had started yelling that the plane was going to blow up, and now they were taking him off the flight and needed backup.

That meant that her much needed, fifteen minute cigarette break was gone, and that made her cranky. The last thing she needed right now was some kid playing a prank when she could be relaxing.

Jamming her smokes back into her pocket, Celia ran back through the terminal to join her stern-looking partner, Jim, and they shared a look of quiet annoyance. This kind of thing was always happening to them. You'd think that they'd be used to it by now.

Celia shrugged. *C'est la vie.*

The pair jogged over to the boarding ramp doors in order to open them.

Before they could reach them, gate forty-six burst open and a mass of aircraft attendants surged through, dragging two teenage boys with them. The fight spilled out into the departure lounge, and Celia and her uniformed partner moved quickly to intercept them, grabbing the two struggling boys and separating them. Behind them, two teachers strode briskly down the tunnel, followed at a short distance by another boy. A bleach-blond girl in white pants was currently engaged in beating the senior copilot on the head with her pink handbag. A timid looking younger girl brought up the rear and stood hovering in the doorway nearby, where she watched the fight with alarm.

The two security guards threw Carter down into one of the steel framed chairs in the waiting area, and unceremoniously dropped Alex down into one across the aisle. Tod took a seat next to him.

Winded, the copilot glared at Carter and then turned to the officers, rubbing his bruised arm. "You got this?"

Jim nodded and as an afterthought pushed Terry into a seat beside Carter to stop her from hitting them with her bag. He'd had enough concussions from working this job to last him a lifetime.

Carter slumped down in his seat, seething, his eyes shooting barbed daggers at Alex. He had been on the plane, bound for makeout city, and now he was back where he started. And worse, his luggage was still on board! That was three bottles of JD he'd never see again. All because Browning had some kind of spaz attack about flying.

His furious gaze homed in on Alex and he lunged out of his seat towards him. "You dick! You're dead!"

Before he had even crossed half the space between the two of them, he collided with Mr Murnau, who grabbed him and held him back, with surprising strength for such a small man. The French teacher put a hand on Carter's chest and shoved him backwards, then stood spread-eagled between the two scrapping students, with a pained look on his face.

This was not the happy start to his little trip that he had hoped for.

"Sit the fuck down, Carter!" yelled Tod from beside the cowering Alex.

Over by the gate, Billy stepped towards them, waving his ticket and confused by the chaos. He turned to one of the seething flight attendants. "I didn't do anything! I have my ticket right here!" he pleaded, hoping to be let back on the plane.

Everybody ignored him.

Disentangling himself from the fight, the copilot turned and stabbed a finger at the room in general. "*No one* gets back on board. That's *my* call," he barked.

He spun on his heel and marched back towards the boarding ramp door, followed by the three flight attendants. They had a flight to catch and the plane was late enough as it was.

Ms Lewton ran after them, frantic. "Please! I've got forty students going to Paris!"

The copilot whirled to face her. "Look, you must understand my posi—"

"I do," Ms Lewton cut in. "I understand your position and I apologize for Alex, but one of us *must* be on that plane. I cannot let all those students go to Paris for ten days without supervision."

As Ms Lewton continued to negotiate with the copilot, Clear slipped around behind the angry knot of people and quietly took a seat at the back of the room, completely unnoticed. She had no idea what was going on, but knew that somehow, she was supposed to be a part of this. She put her bag on the floor and settled herself in her seat, gazing at Alex expectantly and waiting to see what he would do next.

Across the room, Alex sat slumped in his seat, panting, his head whirling. Tod put his hand on his friend's shoulder and tried to calm him down.

"It's alright. It's alright. You're off the plane..." he soothed.

Rattled, Alex tried to compose himself. Every thing was still so fresh in his head that he felt like *this* was a dream—him sitting here in this terminal—and not the other way around. He was terrified that he was suddenly going to wake up and find himself back on the exploding plane. The explosion, the howl of the turbines giving out, the helpless screams of the passengers still rang in his ears, filling him with an overwhelming feeling of dread.

What the hell *was* that?

A dream?

A vision?

A hallucination?

Had someone slipped something in his orange juice before he boarded the plane?

Alex didn't know what it was, but it had freaked the fuck out of him. Again and again he saw the wall of fire shooting towards him, felt that acid jolt of fear as he realized that this was the end, and that he was really about to die. Then the fire hitting him, burning him alive... It was his worst nightmare and he had just lived it. He could still feel his skin melting, his blood boiling, his joints fusing together as the explosion flash fried him.

It had been so real...

Someone was talking. Alex's pupils dilated and his head jerked up in confusion, sweat running down his face as he struggled to focus.

It was Ms Lewton. "Larry," she called out. Mr Murnau strode over towards her, looking grim. Alex watched her in a daze.

"Airline's not taking this very well. They'll let one of us back on and the rest can grab an eleven-ten flight. Gets in three hours later in de Gaulle. It's alright. It's not that big a deal."

Mr Murnau sighed. He looked down at the young English teacher and made a decision. "I'll stay," he said valiantly. He wondered if Ms Lewton knew how beautiful she was when she was flustered.

Ms Lewton shook her head, passing her hand over her eyes tiredly. "No, you know the whole 'French' thing. Get on the plane."

Mr Murnau understood her point and gave her a brief smile of thanks. Then he headed off towards the door to the plane.

Billy tailed him like a hopeful dog, still trying to plead his case. "I was in the bathroom. The lock was stuck. I didn't fight with anyone!"

Mr Murnau spun around, tight-lipped, and made a firm gesture back towards Ms Lewton as if to say "Talk to her!" The door swung closed behind him with a deep *boom*, and Billy stared at it, watching his evening in Paris evaporate right before his eyes.

Just his luck.

Meanwhile, Tod had grabbed a bunch of wet paper napkins from the airport bar and rushed back towards Alex who sat beside Ms Lewton, head in hands.

"I called your parents. They're on their way," he said in a low voice, trying to reassure his stricken friend. He took a seat beside Alex and watched anxiously as Ms Lewton dabbed the back of Alex's neck. Dude was burning up. He looked like shit and was acting like a complete psycho. Tod wondered for a moment if Alex was on drugs. It would certainly explain his crazy behavior.

So what was his deal? Tod had never seen his friend this way before. Alex was usually the calm one, the sane one. Something had to be way wrong with the world for Alex to be the one losing the plot like this. Tod stared at his pale, shaking friend. Alex having a meltdown? Surely that was, like, the seventh sign of the apocalypse or something.



Over by the observation window, Terry and Carter stood with their arms around each other, glumly watching their plane depart. The huge, scraped nose of the jet backed away into the driving rain, taking their evening in Paris with it. A muscle in Carter's jaw twitched as he glared at Alex's reflection in the glass behind him. He should be on that plane! As soon as he got that little fuckwit Alex alone, he and his fists were going to have some very definite words with him. Fucking loser!

Over in the waiting area, Ms Lewton leaned in towards Alex, trying to bite back her annoyance and find out what on earth had just happened to this kid to make him act this way. This wasn't the calm, sensible Alex she knew. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"Alex, talk to me. Tell me what happened."

Alex blew out his cheeks in a puff of air. The room had stopped spinning, and as reality crept back in, he was starting to feel more than a little foolish. He'd just made a huge fuss, got himself and a bunch of students thrown off the plane, wasted a whole afternoon in France, and now his parents had been sent for. And all for what? A dream? Had it all been just a dream?

He was sure he wasn't the first to have a nightmare like that on board an aircraft prior to takeoff. Everyone knew that he was nervous about flying. Takeoff was a pretty nerve-wracking time for everyone, and he wouldn't be blamed for having a panic attack about it—if that's what that was. It must have been triggered when he saw the state of the plane. The jet looked like a death trap, so he had dreamed that it really *was* a death trap.

That made sense.

Right?

Alex shifted in his seat, fighting down the urge to just get up and run out of the building. Everyone was staring at him as though he had just grown three heads or something. The way Lewton was looking at him, he'd be thrown into the school counselor's office the second he set foot in school.

Great.

Alex threw a fitful glance out of the observation window, watching the plane—*their* plane—as it backed away from the glass and started

taxiing towards the main runway, jockeying around into position in a slow, elegant dance. He blinked at it hazily, feeling his sense of reality snap back and forth like elastic. This was real, but then, his dream had felt real too...

He became aware that Ms Lewton was staring at him, and he realized that he was going to have to explain himself to her. Or at least try to.

"I saw it," he said, and paused, trying to work through his thoughts. Then his words came out in a rush as he gestured awkwardly with his hands, ashamed about the fuss he had just made, but determined to tell her what had happened. He nodded out of the window at the plane.

"I saw it on the runway... I saw it take off... Out of my window I saw the ground..." He paused, a fresh wave of terror passing through him. "And then the cabin... it started to shake, and then the left side blew up, and then the whole plane just exploded! And it was so real! Just how everything happened, you know?"

There was a ringing silence. Over by the window, Carter's head swiveled around, exorcist-like, and he glared at Alex. Then he growled under his breath and swung around towards him, clenching his fists. Terry quickly grabbed his arm, restraining him. They had already been thrown off the plane. What was the point of getting thrown out of the airport, too?

Tod was the first to break the silence. "Been on a lot of planes that blew up?" he asked his friend gently. Alex looked at him guiltily, fully aware of how crazy he sounded, but unwilling to back down.

"You must have fallen asleep," said Ms Lewton.

"Hey, whoa." Carter finally shook off Terry and spun around, disbelieving. "We get thrown off a plane; we blow, what? Half a day in Paris? All because Browning had a bad fucking *dream*?" He waved his hands around, limp-wristed, mocking Alex. "Oh wait, but the plane, it's gonna blow up! It's gonna blow up!"

Terry stood behind him with her arms folded, sniggering.

Tod rose to Alex's defense. "Hey, fuck you, Horton."

Alex's eyes suddenly snapped into focus. His swirling confusion focused into one single, diamond-hard point.

Carter was making fun of him. Again.

It was the final straw. His raw nerves twanged, and without even thinking, he launched himself out of his chair at Carter.

"Only trip you're takin' is to the fuckin' hospital!" he snarled.

He smacked into Carter, catching him by surprise and knocking all the wind out of him. The pair of them pitched over backwards and hit the ground hard. Chaos erupted once again as the two boys wrestled on the concrete floor of the empty boarding lounge. Alex got a good solid punch in before the two exasperated security guards stepped in, grabbing him by the arms and dragging him off the floored jock. He hung from their arms, panting.

"You're paying for my trip, Browning!" shouted Carter as the furious guard pulled him backwards, away from Alex.

"I wish you *were* on that plane!" Alex yelled back.

Over by the big, plate glass observation window, Billy Hitchcock turned away from his wrestling classmates, shaking his head in disgust.

Couple of douche bags, the pair of them, he thought to himself.

He was the only sane one in this place. He thrust his hands into his pockets and watched moodily as Flight 180 taxied down the runway and lifted off smoothly into the air, its taillights calmly winking as it soared upwards.

Billy heaved a great sigh. He should have been on that plane, sitting there in his comfy, reclining seat, watching the cartoons and trying to figure out how to hit on Cynthia Paster without her boyfriend noticing. His classmates were on that plane! And so was his luggage. He gave a guilty start as he realized that someone at the other end would find his secret stash of porn and three boxes of whisky-flavored condoms he'd brought with him, just in case.

Well, you never knew, did you?

And more importantly, he'd just spent five bucks on a huge bag of popcorn to last him through the flight that he was now probably never going to eat. One thing Billy really, really hated was seeing good food go to waste.

Life was so unfair.

All these things went through Billy's head as he watched the jet climb high into the air, streaking upwards through the rain.

"There they go, and here we stay," he sighed.

Then his eyes widened as he saw something impossible.

"Oh, Jesus!" he cried.

Before him, clearly visible through the observation window, the climbing plane had just exploded into a giant fireball.

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*KA-BOOOOOOOOM!!!*

The blast was so loud that it seemed to rip the air itself open. A heartbeat later, the observation window blew inward and showered a bullet-like spray of safety glass nuggets all over the departures lounge. The entire building shook as the shockwave of the blast hit it with such power that the steel window frame was wrenched from the wall. People were knocked off their feet, screaming, and the terminal chairs rattled as though hit by an earthquake.

Then, just as suddenly, it was over. Glass clattered to the ground and everything was still again.

Alex gasped, stunned, still on the floor in the suddenly limp arms of the security guard. A high-pitched ringing filled his ears as he raised himself up on an elbow, trembling, and stared out of the shattered window, unwilling to believe what had just happened.

Outside, the plane was gone. In the dark, empty space where it had been was an expanding ring of what looked like cinders. The unceremonious obliteration of hundreds of lives had been so swift that he had blinked once and it had been over.

Alex stared, his mind overloading, as flaming debris started to fall quietly out of the early evening sky.

A moment later the room came back to life in an explosion of movement. The two security guards dropped Alex and Carter, and sprinted for the exit, towards more urgent matters, barking into their radios. Warning lights started flashing and the belligerent wail of sirens sounded outside as red fire trucks screamed across the landing strip, racing to intercept the chunks of burning wreckage as they

rained downwards and peppered the end of the landing strip, and the black water beyond.

By the window, an elderly couple threw their arms around each other and started to cry.

All the blood rushed out of Alex's face as he continued to stare, unbelieving, at the flaming hole in the night sky where seconds before, the plane had been. Then it hit him.

The plane... It had exploded, just like in his dream!

His heart started beating again, pounding so loudly that he thought it might burst. This couldn't be real. It couldn't be happening. If it *was* real, then what had just happened was so sick and twisted and unbelievable that even he couldn't believe it, and he'd been the one at the middle of it all.

Then a thought hit him and he froze.

Slowly and extremely carefully he tore his eyes away from the blazing sky and glanced fearfully behind him.

He was met by a sea of eyes. Everyone was staring at him, Tod, Ms Lewton, Carter, Terry, Clear, the airport security guards—everyone who had been thrown off the plane because of him; everyone in the terminal who had witnessed his little outburst.

Alex swallowed hard, his shock giving way to a sick sense of dread. As the last fiery fragments of Flight 180 plummeted to the ground, the realization slowly dawned on him that everything as he knew it had just changed forever.

He and the others were no longer just students.

They were survivors.

Life would never be the same again.

# THREE

The hands of the airport terminal clock ticked up towards ten pm. The seven survivors of Flight 180 sat numbly on folding metal chairs in the press room of the JFK International Building, waiting. The atmosphere was brittle and tense with residual fear, and the overhead fluorescent lights seemed far too bright. Nobody spoke, each person holding onto their own, individual private traumas, and occasionally darting uneasy glances towards Alex. Everyone was clearly uncomfortable with his presence.

Alex sat a little distance from them all, his head in his hands, his whole body vibrating with shock. Guilt flooded through him, although he knew that he had no reason to feel guilty. He had just saved six lives, hadn't he? But now, everyone was treating him like he was to blame for all of this. Unwillingly, he glanced up, quickly checking out the others out of the corner of his eye, desperate to know what they were thinking.

Billy was fidgety, unsure, practically staring at him. Ms Lewton sat stiffly, head bowed, avoiding eye contact. Tod was staring blankly at the floor, overwhelmed by the loss of his brother. Clear gazed quietly at the door, hugging her knees to her chest, her liquid eyes drained of emotion. Terry sat with her head on Carter's shoulder, the pair of them openly glaring at him like he was some kind of monster. Fear and distrust mingled with the unspoken accusation in their eyes.

Feeling the need to say something and break the silence that was growing between them like a tumor, Alex cleared his throat, his voice hoarse with exhaustion and dry from the air conditioning blasting into the room.

"You're looking at me like I caused this," he informed the room in general.

Nobody replied.

Tod glanced at him for a moment and then looked away.

Alex leaned forward in his chair, looking at each of them in turn, his voice soft but insistent.

"I didn't cause this."

Ms Lewton spoke without looking up. "Are there any survivors?"

Her voice was so quiet, Alex could hardly hear it. It was as if she couldn't believe that she was actually asking him this. Beside her, Tod's gaze snapped up and he stared at Alex with a pathetically hopeful look in his eyes.

Alex shook his head, numb, taken aback by the question. "How should I know?" he snapped, furious.

There was a strained silence. Ms Lewton kept staring at him, her gaze turning angry as though she thought that he was withholding information from her.

"What?" Alex asked defensively. "You think that I'm some sort of —?"

"He's not a witch," interrupted Clear softly. Alex turned to her, relieved and thankful that someone was defending him. Their eyes met and he felt something pass between them, a kind of weird and unwanted connection that jumped between the two of them like a spark of electricity.

Alex frowned.

*Blam!* The door swung open and four official looking men and an older woman marched into the room, waving a number of official badges and passes. Two of them were dressed in suits and wore FBI insignia; the other three simply wore casual clothing as if they had been summoned straight from home, which at this time of night was probably the case.

One man approached the group of survivors; a stocky, honest looking man in his mid-fifties wearing a checked flannel shirt. He had an open, friendly face that you could easily trust.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Howard Seigel, National Transportation Safety Board vice chairman. We've contacted all your families and they are on their way." His gaze flicked round the huddled group. Everyone seemed ill at ease with the formal situation. "Does anyone feel they need medical attention or, er, spiritual counseling at this time?"

One by one the survivors shook their heads, just wanting to get through this and go home.

Only Ms Lewton spoke up. "What's going on? Are there any survivors?"

She gazed up at the official, a desperate prayer in her heart. Part of her already knew the answer. Again and again she saw the plane exploding in midair; felt the same stab of guilt at her own relief that she had escaped death while others had perished.

She had sent Larry back on the plane.

She quickly banished the thought, fresh tears rising in her eyes.

Seigel's gaze flicked quickly to the FBI officers before he turned back to the group. When he answered, his voice was calm, yet carefully honest.

"The cause of the explosion is still undetermined. Nassau county authorities are on the scene. Naval search and rescue are en route. We..."

He broke off, as one of the suited officials pointedly cleared his throat and stepped forward; a pale, weaselly-looking man with gelled hair and prescription glasses.

"I'm Agent Weine. This is Agent Schreck. We're with the FBI," he announced curtly as if this gave him a right to interrupt Seigel. He looked around at the group, concentrating on each person in turn, noticing how Alex's eyes widened in alarm when he heard "FBI," although he did not look up. He filed that little piece of information away. His expression remained grave yet sympathetic as he went on.

"We understand how you may be feeling at this hour, and although we know it may be difficult, we must ask each of you some questions regarding today's events, while they are still fresh in your minds. It may be invaluable to our rescue attempts, or any potential... criminal investigation."

With that, he folded his arms and turned disapproving eyes down on Alex, who looked up at him, a sick expression on his face.

Ah-ha.

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A short while later, an exhausted and drained Alex sat across the table from the two FBI agents in a darkened office towards the rear



of the terminal building. His face was pale and his eyes were red, although he had yet to shed a single tear. The shock was starting to wear off and he stared sightlessly at the table, reliving the horror of the explosion again and again.

The room rang with silence, the only noise audible, the faint drone of vacuuming coming from the next cubicle as the night cleaners went about their duties.

Agent Schreck watched Alex carefully, gauging his body language against his internal tick list of clues, looking for evidence. The kid was obviously strung out and upset, but the question was this: did he look guilty? Schreck was a trained professional with nearly twenty years of experience in dealing with suspects, and he had no idea. That unnerved him as much as the details surrounding this particular case. He had never encountered anything like this before.

He glanced over at Agent Weine, sharing a look. They both suspected that this had been some kind of sabotaged terrorist attack, but the facts didn't ring true. This was an ordinary seventeen year-old kid sitting before them, not some criminal mastermind. What did he know about terrorism? If the boy had known in advance that the plane was going to blow up, why did he get on board in the first place?

There had to be something else going on here. Agent Schreck knew that if there was any kind of criminal activity involved in this catastrophe, he and Agent Weine would find it.

So why did he feel so afraid of this boy?

He cleared his throat, looking at Alex directly, although his expression was not unkind. "You said," he consulted his notes, "'Listen to me! This plane will explode on takeoff!'" He looked at Alex hard, trying to gauge his reaction.

Alex shook his head mindlessly, still staring at the table. Mr Marnau was dead. And so were George, and Tom, and Parker and Emma and...

"How did you know that?" prompted Agent Schreck.

Alex looked up with a start, nervous; not about the suspicion currently being directed at him, but about trying to explain what he himself didn't even understand.

"I got this feeling... This weird feeling. I can't explain it..."

Agent Weine interrupted him, eager to move the boy on. They had heard all this stuff already. "Did you take any sedatives before boarding the plane? Or on board, did you take any sleeping pills, any narcotics or hallucinogens? Alex, did you take any drugs?"

Weine broke off, aware that his voice was rising in frustration. He just wanted to get this case in the bag so he could go home to his bed. They had been there for a while and the kid was still talking garbage. Agent Weine did not suffer fools gladly, and with Alex, he felt like he was definitely suffering.

"No. I *saw* it." Alex glared at Agent Weine as though daring him to disprove it. "I saw it happen."

Tears welled up in Alex's eyes as he grew frustrated with trying to explain the unexplainable. Part of him knew that he sounded like a certified whacko, but at the same time, he *knew* what had happened. There was no denying it. He had to tell these people the truth, and then maybe someone could make sense of it for him.

Somebody had to, or he might just go insane.

"I saw the plane explode," he said carefully, trying to work things through in his mind. "Not like a dream... More than that. I *experienced* the plane exploding. It was horrible..." He swallowed and went on, trying to speak around the growing lump in his throat as the memories came flooding back in gory Technicolor. "I'm not a psychic. I've never had anything like this happen before."

Agent Weine nodded his head dismissively, feeling like he was getting nowhere. This kid was obviously full of shit, and possibly on drugs. Still, he would get to the bottom of this, and with any luck he would be at home curled up in bed with a hot toddy before the hour was through.

Time to go for broke. He licked his lips and then leaned forward and asked the ten thousand dollar question. "Did this 'weird feeling' have anything to do with you saying you wished Carter Horton was on the plane, just before it exploded?"

Alex looked up, tearful, stunned. He hadn't even remembered he'd said that until now. "No!"

"Then why'd you say it?"

"Because... I never thought it would happen, Alex whispered. He looked up at the two FBI agents, tears in his eyes, quietly begging for understanding.

Agent Weine gave Alex a long, hard look, the light reflecting off his horn-rimmed glasses. He was not convinced.

"If that's the case, Alex, why did you *really* get off the plane?"

Alex stared at the agent, and something inside him gave a sick little twist. The man was humoring him. Why was he even bothering to tell him the truth? He may as well have himself committed right now and be done with it.

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Twenty minutes later, Tod sat across the same table, his normally mischievous expression drained of life as he recounted his version of the story to the two agents.

"My brother George... He told me to go and keep an eye on Alex. He stayed, and I went to make sure Alex was okay." His expression froze as the realization hit him. "He told me to get off the plane."

In another room across the corridor, Ms Lewton wore a similar sickened expression as she talked to a third official.

"Larry Murnau said I should get back on, but I told him to go." Her expression flooded with guilt. "I sent him back on the plane."

Half an hour ticked past, and then it was Clear's turn with the FBI. She curled up on her seat, guarded, suspicious, as Agent Schreck questioned her.

"No one forced you off the plane," he was saying. "You said you aren't friends with any that did. So, Clear, why did you leave the airplane?"

Clear looked up, her voice steady with total resolve. "Because I saw and I heard Alex. And... I believed him."

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It was past midnight when the group reunited in the waiting room. The tense silence stretching between them was finally broken when

the door flew open and the students' parents rushed into the room, each moving with both grief and relief toward their child.

Alex's mother broke down in tears as she rushed over to him, enveloping him in an anguished bear hug. She held him tight while his father grabbed Alex's hand and squeezed it, his eyes filling with tears. Alex held onto his mother, but his eyes were dry as he stared over her shoulder, anxiously watching the others. Carter's parents embraced him worriedly, but Carter pulled away after a moment as though uncomfortable with the open display of emotion.

Alex's eye roved round the room, and then he froze as he saw that Tod's dad was staring at him, arms around his one remaining son, anger and accusation warring for supremacy on his lined face. A memory slammed into Alex's mind, of him gaily waving his sons off at the entrance to the terminal. "Take care of them for me, Alex!" he'd said, five hours and a lifetime ago.

Alex looked up into Tod's father's tearstained face, and dropped his gaze, starting to shake all over again. He'd saved Tod's life; he knew that for a fact. But judging by the look on Mr Waggner's face, in *his* mind, he'd let George die.

Clear Rivers stood behind the door, looking nervously around at the embracing families, hurt that no one had come to pick her up. Her gaze met Alex's in a silent question. After a moment, Alex nodded, relieved that at least one person was on his side. He'd give her a ride home.

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The rain fell in gray sheets across the wet asphalt as Mr Browning's car slowed down outside Clear's house. In the back, Clear sat huddled in her seat, looking out at the gathering storm. Every so often, she glanced anxiously across at Alex. His face was completely blank as he stared out of the window, apparently not even aware of her presence as he wrestled with his emotions.

Clear wrapped her arms around herself, completely drained, feeling like an outsider in this car full of family; yet she knew that she and Alex were now intimately connected by a bond that could never

be broken. She owed this boy her life, yet he hadn't so much as glanced at her since they'd started the long drive home, too wrapped up in his own private grief to even register that she was there.

She shyly peeked over at him, watching him gaze dazedly out of the window as the orange light from the street washed over his face, turning his fixed expression into a flickering jumble of moving shadows. She wished that she could reach out to him in some way; to comfort him and reassure him that he wasn't going crazy.

How could she, if he wouldn't even look at her?

She saw her house approaching and sighed before shyly signaling in the mirror to Mr Browning. It was too late to talk to Alex now.

"Um. Here's good," she piped up, thankful for the ride, yet oddly apprehensive about the journey ending, now that she was back home. Once she stepped out of the car she would have to face reality.

She had lived, while others had died.

Now she would have to deal with it... alone.

She wondered whether her mom had even registered that she had gone. She wouldn't be the least bit surprised if she hadn't even missed her yet. It seemed like her mom was never home these days, and Clear realized with a jolt that she hadn't even spoken to her about the French trip. All those art lessons had come in handy when it came to forging signatures on official documents, and Clear was a pro. Getting "permission" to go on the trip had been no problem.

The car pulled over and Clear climbed slowly out. "Thanks for the ride!" she called to Mr Browning, flashing Alex one last look.

He continued staring out of the window, completely unaware of her.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Clear slammed the door and stood miserably in the rain as Alex's car glided off down the road. She watched until the red glow of the car's taillights disappeared into the darkness.

Then she turned and reluctantly made her way back towards her home.

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Home.

Alex sat slumped on the sofa in his living room as the clock ticked towards five in the morning. He listened to his parents' light breathing as they dozed fitfully on the sofa next to him. The storm still raged outside, but he was safe and warm in their darkened living room, waiting out the night.

He was downstairs because he couldn't bear to go into his bedroom. He had finally broken down upon entering it, faced with the perverse normalcy of his own room. All his possessions, the scattered debris of his frenzied packing still sitting untouched on the floor—it was all too much for him. His mother had held him tight while great, gut wracking sobs consumed him, and then the three of them had gone downstairs and sat up through the night, watching the news reports of the Flight 180 disaster on CNN as the first pictures of the crash came flooding in.

Alex's parents showed none of the suspicion or doubt, the others had shown. Alex knew that they had been told by the officials about his 'premonition, and what had happened, but he knew that they were too overwhelmed with relief that he hadn't been killed in the plane crash to really make too much out of it. They were just glad that he was alive—the details didn't matter to them.

Alex wished that the others would treat him the same way.

His parents had dozed off a good hour ago, but Alex sat awake, exhausted, but too wired to sleep. The screen in front of him was filled with flickering pictures of the crash as if the images were beamed directly from hell: twisted wreckage, burning fuel, personal belongings and suitcases were being fished out of the water, all clearly visible by the harsh lights of the rescue boats. Alex realized that these were the very same suitcases that he had watched being loaded onto the plane just a few short hours ago, and his head spun with fresh terror. He listened to the TV with half an ear, although he already knew every word of the repeated reports off by heart.

"You are looking at the first piece of debris to wash ashore from Volee-Air Flight 180, which exploded shortly after a nine twenty-five pm takeoff from John F Kennedy Airport on Long Island, New York," announced the anchorman.

Onscreen, glum-looking rescue workers stood around a giant hunk of blackened metal wrapped in yellow striped police tape, watching as it was slowly winched aboard a flatbed truck, ready for examination. It could have been from any part of the plane.

"There are no known survivors," the anchorman went on. "However, coastguard and naval search and rescue efforts are continuing, even as jet fuel burns on the ocean's surface..."

Alex stared into the screen, feeling the blackness of the lapping, oily waters invade his very soul. The on-screen pictures chilled him to the bone. He sat and stared at them in a daze. He was used to seeing pictures of tragedies and disasters on TV—he saw them every day—to the point where they had almost become meaningless.

But this was different.

This was personal.

If he hadn't gotten off the plane when he did, that could've been *him* on that screen being loaded into a body bag.

A shiver passed over him, despite the warmth in the room, and he stole a fitful glance at his parents who were wrapped up in one another's arms on the sofa. His dad had his feet up on the coffee table, the TV guide opened on his lap. One arm was wrapped comfortingly around his mom, who was curled up in a graceful comma shape next to him, her head on his lap and her bare feet nestled beneath a cushion. Asleep, their expressions were so peaceful, and Alex's heart leapt fiercely at the sight of them.

*He was alive.*

This was his reality; here, now. If it wasn't for his premonition, vision, or whatever the hell that thing had been, he doubted they'd be sleeping so peacefully, or indeed, at all. He had saved himself and spared his own family and six others the horror of losing a child.

Okay, scratch that. He had saved *five* families that horror. But Mr and Mrs Waggner still had Tod. Without his vision, they would have lost both sons.

A picture of Mr Waggner's accusing face drifted into Alex's mind, and he shook his head to try to dislodge it, feeling a flare of anger at Tod's dad for thinking badly of him, and angry at himself for not

saving George. All it would've taken was a moment of his time, and George wouldn't have been on the plane either.

But he hadn't *known*, had he?

Or rather, he *had* known, but he hadn't thought things through. How could he have? He had been so terrified on board that plane that all he'd been able to think about was getting off himself. It was self-preservation, and he'd been lucky that the other guys had followed him out.

If they hadn't, they would be dead, too.

Alex pushed himself up straighter in his chair, stretching his creaking spine, wrestling with thoughts too big for his sleep deprived brain to deal with. Then, as he stared at the screen, a new, terrible thought hit him; one that had been biding its time for the past couple of hours, waiting for the worst possible moment to strike.

*Could he have saved everyone?*

Alex felt a cold weight drop in the pit of his stomach. He really wished that he hadn't just thought of that.

He sighed, rubbing his eyes. Could he really have averted the tragedy? He'd seen it happen, and at the time, he'd felt that it was real. What could he have done to save everyone? Faked a heart attack? Kidnapped the pilot? Lain prone in front of the wheels of the plane until someone listened to him and checked the plane's engines?

Of course not. All of the above would've just had the same affect—an unceremonious removal by airport security, and a long trip to the police station, while behind him the aircraft soared up into the night sky and exploded all over again.

Could he have reasoned with the cabin staff? What words could he have used to persuade the airline reps to keep the aircraft on the ground until it had been checked over?

Alex shook himself, trying to fight the sick feeling of guilt that washed through him. He could've saved everyone, but he didn't. It was too late now, and he couldn't keep thinking like that. He knew that these questions would continue to haunt him till the day he died. Had he saved seven people, or through inaction sent nearly three hundred people to their deaths?



His brain overloaded as scenarios and counter-scenarios ran on a loop inside his head, and he turned his attention back to the screen, trying to distract himself with the still blaring news report.

"Authorities are pessimistic about the possibility of finding anyone alive from the ill-fated flight. All two hundred and eighty-seven passengers are feared dead."

Except that there were originally two hundred and ninety-four passengers, weren't there? Alex thought, and a chill crept over him.

The newscaster went on. "Amongst the travelers, a class of forty students and four teachers from Mount Abraham High School, en route to Paris on a field trip. There are reports that several students were removed from the aircraft moments before departure; however, investigators remain guarded about the specifics of the incident. Eyewitnesses at the airport, as well as on Long Island, report seeing the plane explode just moments after takeoff..."

Alex flinched as a crack of thunder banged through the air outside, punctuating the word "explode." It was almost too much for his shredded nerves to take. He glared over his shoulder at the raging storm outside, wishing that the weather would just shut the hell up and leave him alone. It was as though Mother Nature herself was angry at him for what had happened.

Unable to shake the feeling, Alex twisted fully around in his seat and looked fearfully out of the window. Hell, maybe she was. He'd just gone and broken one of her fundamental laws, right? Thou shall not see the future.

The rainstorm intensified as if in agreement, and after a minute's silent contemplation, Alex levered himself up out of his chair and walked cautiously towards the window. He stood, looking out at the raging storm, moodily watching the condensation drip down the inside of the glass. Something in the air felt... wrong. He had never liked thunderstorms, but now the sight and sound of so much raw energy filled him with a sick feeling of helplessness.

He had seen what that energy could do. He had *felt* it, in that one searing, fiery moment of death aboard the aircraft.

Now, looking out at the thunderstorm, Alex felt something inside him start to panic. He had never felt so small, so utterly insignificant,

in his entire life. Nature didn't give a damn about him, about his classmates, about the two hundred and eighty-seven people it had just killed on board that aircraft. Screw that—Mother Nature couldn't care less about the very existence of humanity. People were less than nothing to fire, to water, to electricity. The elements could destroy a mere flesh-and-blood human being so quickly, so utterly, that suddenly, everything in the world seemed meaningless to Alex. What was the point of buildings, of culture, of music and life and love, if people didn't matter?

A second crack of lightning split the air open, and Alex turned away from the window, sickened by the violence in the atmosphere. A fizzing sound caught his attention, and he opened his eyes again to see a spiderweb of lightning tangle in the sky above his little street, the arcing purple-white lines of energy combining to form one large bolt. Alex jumped back from the window as it sizzled through the air towards his front yard. Oddly, it did not touch down, but rather seemed to hang suspended in the air, right in front of his house.

Alex blinked.

In that split-second flash, the lightning bolt had looked just like a glowing, abstract hand with a giant outstretched finger.

And it was pointing right at him.

Alex lurched away from the window, his heart thumping in panic. An instant later, the fuses blew in the junction box outside, plunging the street into darkness.

Alex backed away from the window into the darkened room, trembling.

Superstitious was really not a good thing right now.

# FOUR

A month passed in a blur. On the thirty-ninth day after the explosion, Alex found himself sitting beside his parents at the school's memorial service, fidgety in his borrowed black suit and tie. The service had been going on for over an hour and showed no sign of letting up.

Alex glanced fitfully around at the somber rows of black-clad students, sitting silently amid the leafy green trees on the Mount Abraham High School lawn. Most were there out of pity or duty. Others had lost friends in the disaster and mopped silent tears from their flushed faces, while their parents tried in vain to comfort them. The atmosphere was grim, the youngsters stunned by the loss and the parents and teachers quietly grieving. Some of them held roses, others just held each other.

Ms Lewton sat up on the hastily constructed stage, tears openly running down her face, while a female math teacher patted ineffectually at her arm. She had lost weight and her usually beautiful face was haggard from crying. She wiped at her streaming eyes with an already soaked handkerchief, avoiding looking at the students before her. There was one face in particular she didn't want to see.

The seven Flight 180 survivors were dotted through the crowd, sitting beside family members, each alone in his or her thoughts. Although they were separated, each could feel the presence of the other six as though an invisible and unbreakable cord bound them together. They felt more than grief, more than anguish at the catastrophe. As they sat, staring at the covered memorial sculpture at the front of the crowd, engraved with the names of their deceased classmates, each shared an identical thought, an identical sense of terror, an identical sense of unreality.

*That could've been me.*

The thought sizzled back and forth between them like unseen electricity. They carefully avoided looking at one another, unwilling

to see the look on each others' faces that they knew they wore on their own.

Alex sat stiffly in his steel-backed chair, head bowed, intense guilt mingling with the sorrow on his face. Although it was daylight, he felt as though there was a spotlight shining down on him from above, fixing him to his chair like a bug on a pin. He was acutely aware of the stares of his fellow students burning into the back of his head. Some were accusatory, some scared, others just plain nosy. The word about his little "premonition" had gone around like a brushfire in hell the day after the catastrophe, and now everyone knew.

Everyone.

Now, he was alone among strangers that had previously been friends, lost in a life that was no longer his own. Alex's classmates avoided him, the teachers whispered about him, the school officials tried in vain to counsel him. He was an oddity, a freak on display from the minute he set foot in the school foyer to the second he left at the end of the day. Lessons were a blur and lunchtimes were a nightmare. Nothing seemed important to him any more.

One or two brave souls tried to talk to him about what had happened, and he had made sure they quickly regretted it. He didn't want their help, and he sure as hell didn't want their pity. At seventeen, the biggest worries on most students' minds were passing their grades, avoiding homework and finding a date for the prom. No one knew how to deal with death, and those who tried did it badly. It had only been a month and already Alex was sick of it. What on earth did you say to someone who had cheated death because of some whacked-out freaky vision? Nobody knew, and Alex didn't care to find out.

Alex hunched down lower in his chair, trying to ignore the stares burning into the back of his head. He tried to shut himself off from it, as he had shut himself off from the world. Out of school, he quietly went about his daily business while he tried to come to terms with what had happened. But there were no books in the library about premonitions, and the Internet directed him to tarot card sites and aura therapy chatrooms when he tried to look up stuff on "visions."

Alex sighed and tried to concentrate on what the minister was saying.

"Thirty-nine days have passed since we lost our thirty-nine loved ones: friends and teachers," intoned the somber looking minister, gazing out at the assembled students. "As each day passes without a determining cause for the accident, we ask ourselves, 'Why?'"

No, *you* ask yourself, "Why?" Alex thought. I ask myself, "What the fuck?"

Unable to put off the moment any longer, he raised his head and looked across the crowd with unwilling eyes, seeking out his fellow Flight 180 survivors. Several rows back, he saw the black, gimlet eyes of Carter fixed on him, glinting with an unwavering hate. Beside him, Terry's blonde head was bent, a pink rose pressed to her lips. Tod was sitting a short distance ahead of him beside his own parents with a numb look on his face. Mrs Waggner was weeping bitterly, and Mr Waggner was staring blankly into the distance beyond the minister.

Feeling Alex's gaze on them, Mr Waggner glanced back over his shoulder and gave Alex a hard glare before pointedly turning his back on him.

Alex swallowed, averting his eyes and shifting uncomfortably on his cold, steel chair. His father followed his gaze and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, as the minister carried on, reading from a book of scriptures.

"Ecclesiastes tells us, 'Man no more knows his own time than fish taken in the fatal net, or birds trapped in the snare. Like these children of men, caught when the time falls suddenly upon them.'"

*I knew*, thought Alex. So what does that mean?

A sixth sense nagged at him, and he looked over his shoulder to see two very familiar figures standing on the periphery of the gathering. Agents Weine and Schreck were lounging against a fence at the back of the crowd, apparently there to pay their respects. Although they both wore dark sunglasses, the subtle tilt of their heads indicated that they were very definitely watching Alex.

Seeing him turn, they both hurriedly glanced away, Agent Schreck pretending to watch the ceremony, while Agent Weine inspected his fingernails with exaggerated interest. Alex inwardly shook his head.

Real subtle, guys. So much for all that FBI training...

He turned away, suddenly tense, but not before catching sight of a second familiar figure, who was also carefully watching him. Behind him, Clear Rivers sat off to one side by herself, looking out of place in a simple, black cotton dress. Two empty seats flanked her. She had come to the ceremony alone.

Alex could feel her gaze searing into the back of his head, as though challenging him to defy what the minister was saying.

Alex self-consciously lowered his head, unable to face her, his fellow students, or indeed the very words being spoken. He should never have come to this ceremony. He'd thought that he needed to see this, to feel this, in order to heal, but now sitting here with everyone around him, he may as well have taken a rusty can opener to his own emotional wounds.

He sat hunched on his chair, quietly freaking out.

The soft chords of an acoustic guitar reached out across the hushed congregation. A student took the microphone without introduction and began to play Neil Young's "Long May You Run." In the crowd, somebody sobbed.

"And so before we can heal," the minister went on, "before we can escape the presence of Death and Time, we must mourn and celebrate their's with this memorial."

As he spoke, two other students stepped onto the stage and removed the cloth from the memorial sculpture with a flourish. A magnificent, six-foot-high golden eagle was revealed, cast in bronze, its base etched with the names of the departed.

Alex stared at it dully. Normally, he would've thought something like that was cheesy. But as he looked at the bronze bird with its outstretched wings glinting in the bright sunlight, he felt a hard lump form in his throat.

As the notes of the guitar swelled in volume, the assembled students began to rise to their feet, one by one, and started walking down towards the memorial to pay their respects. Each student held a rose, and as they passed by the bronze eagle, they deposited the flowers at its base.

A knot of anxiety ran through Alex at the thought of getting up and drawing further attention to himself. Impulsively, he glanced back over his shoulder at Clear. She was staring straight ahead, but after a moment she turned her head to gaze at him. This time, Alex held the look, seeking comfort—however tenuous—in the one person who had not yet condemned him. Clear returned the look unflinchingly, but with a hint of a question on her face. Her eyes were startlingly blue in the washed-out sunshine. He realized that he'd never seen her in a dress before.

Alex held her gaze for a moment longer and then turned away again, sighing. He had to move. He couldn't put off getting up any longer or he'd start to attract even more attention.

Here goes.

Unwillingly, Alex climbed to his feet and began shuffling his way past the lines of empty chairs towards the front, his single red rose held out before him like a shield. He tried to ignore the stares, tried not to hear the ripple of whispers that followed him as he walked. He saw Carter and Terry standing at the back of the line and silently cursed, clenching his fists. A run-in with Carter was the last thing he needed, but he had been spotted, and to go back would only make him look as guilty as he felt.

Carter tuned his head fractionally at Alex's approach. Browning! That freak! No way should he be allowed here, the bully thought to himself. Carter wrapped his arms possessively around Terry, who looked pale and drawn. She was completely exhausted by the thirty-nine days of the best trauma counseling her parents' money could buy.

Carter cleared his throat and spoke without turning around. "Hope you don't think, Browning, that because my name ain't on this wall, that I owe you anything."

"I don't," muttered Alex, praying for this to be over quickly.

Carter seemed satisfied. He nodded his head at the memorial and turned around to face Alex, puffed up with piety and self-importance. "All I owe these people is to live my life to the fullest."

Alex winced at the gust of alcohol on Carter's breath. The smell of drink was so strong it actually made his eyes water.

"Then maybe you should lay off the JD, huh, Carter?" he said quietly, so only Carter could hear him.

Carter's eyes sparked with sudden violence, and he grabbed Alex by the arm, ignoring the fresh stares this generated. "Don't *ever* fucking tell me what to do!" he spat. "*I* control my life. *Not* you."

"Carter!" snapped Terry. She grabbed Carter's hand, trying to pull him off Alex. This was supposed to be a memorial service, and she had no more patience with her boyfriend's bullying tactics.

Carter glared at her, trembling with emotion, and then flicked his furious gaze back to Alex. He squeezed Alex's arm hard before finally relenting under the heat of Terry's stare and releasing his grip.

"I'm never gonna die," he growled, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Then he whirled and strode off down the line.

Alex stared after him as his mind processed a new thought.

Was it just him, or was big bad-boy Carter afraid?

Terry lingered a moment longer, eyeing Alex, torn. She reached out as though to touch Alex's arm where Carter had squeezed it, then hesitated and dropped her eyes. With a small, helpless shrug, she quickly moved off to follow Carter.

Shaken, Alex stood dithering, unsure about whether to proceed to the memorial. He stepped aside to let others pass. A moment later, the familiar form of Billy Hitchcock headed back up the line and walked up to him.

"So, I took my driver's test this week at the DMV," he started in a cheerful, brittle voice.

Alex turned to him in surprise, incredulous at the normalcy of his conversation.

"Got a seventy," Billy went on determinedly. "Lowest score, but I passed. When I was done with the test, the guy who drives with you during the test, he goes, 'Young man, you're going to die at a very young age.'"

Billy turned to Alex, his bright eyes flickering in worry. "That true?"

Alex took a deep breath, trying to control the deep anger that suddenly welled up inside him. They were at a memorial service,



paying their respects to forty of his classmates, and this guy was asking him to read his fucking palm?

"Not here, Billy," Alex growled, trying to keep his voice down. "Not now. Not ever!"

Billy's face fell. He nodded to himself as if he had known Alex might react this way. He turned and started to move away, then hesitated and doubled back, unable to resist asking just one more thing.

"If I ask out Cynthia Paster, will she say 'No?'" he asked in a rush, pathetically hopeful.

Alex glared at him. Billy finally got the message and shrugged, turning away.

Alex returned to the line, moving towards the memorial. He couldn't wait till this freak show was over and done with.

At the front of the line, Ms Lewton placed a rose at the base of the memorial, then studied the engraved names as the students moved past her. One name in particular caught her eye, and she choked back a sob. She reached out with a trembling finger, touching the etched name of Larry Murnau.

If she hadn't said what she'd said, he might be here today...

Alex walked up behind her and watched her sympathetically, understanding her pain. She had completely ignored him since the disaster. Maybe now was the time for him to make the first move and try to put things right. After a respectful moment, he cleared his throat.

"Ms Lewton..." he started.

Ms Lewton froze and then yanked her finger away from the memorial as if stung. "Don't talk to me. You scare the hell out of me," she snapped. She spun on her heel and quickly strode off, burying her sobs in a handkerchief.

Alex was shattered. He stood by the memorial in a daze, worlds colliding in his head. He really was alone. Ms Lewton was a teacher. She was supposed to be the one helping him, not the other way around. If she wouldn't even talk to him, what chance did he have with the others?

After a moment, Alex became aware that someone had stepped up beside him. Hardly daring to look, he glanced sideways. It was Tod, looking tense and out of place in a starched blue suit and tie. Together, they stood side by side and faced the memorial.

"Hey," said Alex after a while.

"Hey," replied Tod. His face was pinched with worry, and gray from lack of sleep. He seemed to have aged far more than just thirty-nine days. For once, he did not smile.

Alex noticed that Tod's father was not in line and relaxed somewhat, dropping his voice conspiratorially. "Listen, man. I don't want to sound gay or nothin', but... I miss you."

Tod nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. I miss you too." He paused. A smile twitched the corner of his mouth and then vanished again as he caught sight of one particular name on the memorial base. His face hardened. "My father, you know... he doesn't understand."

They stood in silence, staring at the stone memorial that represented thirty-nine lives, or rather, thirty-nine deaths. Tod was the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Hey, look. When he gets over this thing, you and me, we'll road trip to the city? Catch the Yanks?" Tod quickly glanced at Alex sideways, as though preparing to be turned down.

Alex smiled for what seemed like the first time in weeks, and he turned to his friend in relief. "Yeah, alright. We'll do that."

They both relaxed. Tod nodded, the rift between them healed. The two friends stood together for a while before Tod gestured towards the wooden podium.

"Okay, I gotta go," he said. "This thing Ms Lewton showed me in her class, they're gonna let me read it." He gazed at the memorial, and then his jaw tightened. "It says what I'm feeling."

For a moment, Tod gazed up at the memorial, looking way beyond his years.

"Okay," said Alex. "Take care, man."

Tod nodded, then turned and quickly walked off.

Alex let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. Finally, this was almost over.

He turned to go and then stiffened as he felt someone else approach him. He turned around to see Clear Rivers walking up behind him, holding a white rose. She stopped in front of him and gazed at him wordlessly, a million thoughts spinning in her head, before dropping her eyes. She wanted so desperately to speak to him, but hadn't a clue where to begin.

He looked at her, puzzled.

"Because of you... I'm still alive," Clear began. She spoke haltingly, her eyes darting back and forth like a frightened mouse. She had a long speech carefully rehearsed in her mind, but as she stood there awkwardly in front of Alex, she realized that there was only one thing she wanted to say to him. She held his gaze for a long moment, her deep blue eyes searching his, and then thrust the rose out to him.

"Thank you."

As Alex took the rose, a bright flash went off on the periphery of his vision. He turned to see a journalist with a big camera hurrying away from him, and realized he'd just been photographed taking the rose from Clear.

His fists clenched in helpless fury. Did these people have no respect at all?

Alex quickly turned back to Clear, but she had gone.

Dammit!

A wave of overwhelming anger bubbled up inside Alex. He looked down at the white rose in his hand, uncontrollable feelings bubbling up inside him. Of everyone at this whole godforsaken ceremony, Clear was the only one who had thanked him for saving her life. He supposed that he should be grateful, but as things stood, it only served to emphasize the great gulf that had been created between him and his fellow students.

He stood, looking after Clear as she hurried away from him, torn. On one hand, he wanted to go after her. The way she had looked at him, it was as though there was something inside her that understood him, not just about today, but about everything that had happened. Alex wondered vaguely whether he should go and try to talk to her, but already she was squeezing back into her row, taking her seat like nothing had happened. Talking would have to wait.

Right now, there was nothing more he could do but pray that the rest of the ceremony went without incident.

Alex sighed. Then he started the long trek back to his seat.

A moment later, Alex was sitting beside his parents as Tod gave his speech. The young man's voice was strong as he gripped the sides of the podium, nervous but determined, his voice ringing out over the silent mass of students.

"We say that the hour of death cannot be forecast But when we say this, we imagine that the hour is placed in an obscure and distant future. It never occurs to us that it has any connection with the day already begun, or that death could arrive this same afternoon. This afternoon, which is so certain, and which has every hour filled in advance..."

As Tod spoke, the sunlight suddenly turned to shadow. Alex looked up at the sky. It was still deep blue, but a single black cloud blocked the sun. A slight breeze sprang up out of nowhere, flapping the American flag that hung at half-mast beside the memorial.

Alex shivered and glanced back up at Tod, troubled. He could've sworn he saw the shadows behind his friend *move*.

\*\*\*

The following evening, Alex sat at his computer desk staring intently at the screen. The desk before him was swamped with an impressive array of books borrowed from the school library about airline disasters and aviation engineering. The library assistant had stared at him suspiciously when he had checked them out, as he had suspected she would, but at this point, he was beyond caring. He just wanted to know what had happened. Computer printouts of news reports about the Flight 180 crash were scattered everywhere, competing for space with stacks of aircraft schematics and blueprints of the Flight 180 jet, all downloaded off the Internet.

Alex leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully studied the paper mountain of research that had obsessed him for the last four weeks with a look of despair. Dark circles ringed his eyes, but there was no way he was going to bed yet. It wasn't that he didn't want to sleep—

he couldn't. Every time he closed his eyes, the pseudo-memories of the crash came flooding back to him, endlessly replaying on a loop inside his head. Again and again he saw the aircraft exploding. The passengers dying. The wall of white fire sweeping towards him. The flood of insane terror as he realized he was about to die. And overriding everything, always, was the throaty roar of the plane's engine, like the white noise of Death. Every night he would wake up screaming, his mind swamped with graphic images no kid his age should have seen, let alone felt.

Sweat beaded Alex's forehead as he sipped from a mug of steaming coffee, determined to stay awake just one more hour. More bad dreams were the last thing he needed. His eyes fell on the battered copy of the Sri Vaishnava philosophy guide that the Hare Krishna dude had given him at the airport. He had found it stuffed carelessly in his bag when he had finally got up the nerve to unpack, and freaked himself out afresh. Perhaps he should read it. You never knew; there might be something helpful in there. Right now, he didn't even dare touch it for fear of it bringing back the memories of that fateful day. Perhaps it had been cursed. Or maybe the Hare Krishna had put a curse on him and given him the vision because Ms Lewton had been rude to him.

Alex sat back in his chair. A part of him knew that he was losing the plot, but at this stage, he found that he didn't much care. The world could go to hell. In the meantime, he had research to do.

The breeze from the fan on the windowsill rustled the newspaper flung over the back of a nearby chair. Alex turned worried eyes towards it, and then stretched out a hand and picked it up.

He unfolded it, gazing down at the bold headlines.

A photo report from the memorial service the previous day stared up at him. His sleep blurred eyes took in the single photo, which showed Clear sitting alone in her chair, clutching her rose with a Mona Lisa expression on her face, and gazing at something just off-frame.

Alex realized that she must have been looking at him when the picture was taken, and studied the picture afresh. Something about

Clear's expression: her pose, the way that black dress hung on her... She looked kind of mysterious; kind of daring. Sultry, almost.

Alex frowned, puzzled by his reaction, then reached up and rubbed his eyes. Man, forget losing the plot. At this point, he felt that the plot had lost him. All this thinking about death was doing weird things to his mind. Next thing he knew, he'd be beating off to the obituaries section. They should just have him committed and be done with it.

He tossed the paper down on top of the desk, exasperated, but he couldn't shake off the strange feeling about Clear. He tried to reason with himself. Why was he thinking this way all of a sudden? So the girl hadn't shat on him like everyone else. So what? Didn't mean he owed her anything.

He'd saved her life, so they were even.

Still, the way she'd looked at him at the memorial service... Those eyes of hers—innocent and knowing all at once. It just made him feel so.... so...

Alex hesitated before reaching out a hand towards the bottom drawer of his cabinet. Digging through the mess inside, he pulled out a tatty copy of *Penthouse*. Closing the drawer quietly, he flipped the magazine open to the center spread. The model's pose and expression tempted him towards a momentary respite from his troubles.

But as he scooted backwards in his chair, Alex's attention was caught by the caption beneath the centerfold.

"Tymme Has Come Today!" it proclaimed.

Alex's eyes crept back towards the open newspaper, resting guiltily on the picture of Clear.

"Memorial Held Yesterday," read the headline.

Alex's expression fell. It had only been a day since the funeral.

This was so, so wrong.

What the hell was wrong with him?

\*\*\*

Three streets away, in his modest semi-detached house, Tod stood in his living room, barefoot and dressed in a loose flannel shirt and

pajama pants, looking down sadly at his parents. They were sprawled together on the sofa, sound asleep in front of the muted TV, which was tuned to a CNN news report.

Tod shook his head in wonder. It had been thirty nine days, and they still hadn't turned off the TV.

He leaned back on the doorframe, wishing that he could do something more to help them. The guidance counselor had told him that grief affected different people in different ways, but at this stage, Tod wondered whether it should be his parents who got sent to the counselor and not him. The TV thing was starting to worry him.

He gazed down at his parents, remembering. After they had got back from the airport that fateful night, they had sat up in front of the TV together till dawn, watching the initial reports of the Flight 180 disaster, and hadn't moved until suppertime the following day, hoping for a miracle, and praying that George would be found alive. It was a long shot, but it was still a shot.

Anything was better than just accepting that their son was dead.

That hope had been shattered by a single, bleak phone call from the sheriff that same afternoon, and that was the end of that. Tod still couldn't believe it. His brother was dead. He had known that he was dead, but it had finally been confirmed. George had been taken away from them, and all that was left to do now was grieve.

Although Tod's parents knew that he was really dead, really gone, the act of switching off the TV would mean that they would never see him alive again.

So, they had left it on, and had sat up in front of it night after night, clinging to one another, too numb to even leave the house.

The whole thing with Alex had been so unreal, so perverse, that perhaps his parents reasoned that reality itself would refuse to accept what had happened, and that somehow, magically, they would wake up in the morning to find that their son had been returned to them.

But that hadn't happened.

Now, they sat sprawled in front of the lonely light of the flickering set, surrounded by half-read newspapers, photo albums, empty shot glasses and balled-up tissues; like a flesh-and-blood sculpture of parental grief.

Tod stared at them for a long moment before reaching down and picking up a crystal tumbler from the coffee table in front of his dad. It was half-full of amber scotch. Tod eyed it dubiously for a moment, swilling the liquid around, then quickly knocked it back and set it down on the table, screwing up his face with a shudder at the bitter, woody taste. The fiery liquid scorched his throat and then quickly spread out in his stomach, filling him with a brief, yet comforting glow.

Hmmm. Not bad.

He could see why his father drank this stuff so often.

Licking his lips, Tod turned his back on his slumbering parents and made his way quietly towards the stairs.

Bedtime.

Upstairs, Tod paused in front of the bathroom, debating whether he was too tired to brush his teeth. Common sense won out in the end—he had enough fillings as it was—and he sleepily pushed the bathroom door open, yawning. The white tiled floor was cold beneath his bare feet, and he shivered as he walked haltingly over to the sink. He paused in front of the medicine cabinet, staring at his haggard reflection in the mirror. The expression on his own face haunted him. He looked sad and gaunt, like a junkie down to his last dose of methadone.

Jeez. What a state. No wonder everybody was worried about him. He was never gonna get laid if the girls saw him looking like that.

Tod ran a thoughtful hand over the millimeter-long stubble roughening his jawline before reaching for a razor. May as well try to clean up a bit before hitting the sack, as God knew he'd be too tired to do it in the morning.

He yawned, looking forward to going to sleep, but dreading the thought of going to school the next day. Still, life went on. He may as well get on with it.

Behind him, the curtain of the bathroom window billowed briefly inwards, as if an unseen presence had just entered through the half-open window. It rippled across the shower curtains, toyed briefly with the flapping end of the toilet paper, then passed behind Tod,



riffling through his hair. Tod sensed the movement and half turned to see that the window was ajar.

He quickly walked over and slid it closed, shivering.

Behind him, the remains of the cold breeze carried on its way, lightly blowing against the bathroom door so that it swung shut. The lock clicked down soundlessly.

Tod didn't notice. He was preoccupied with more important things. Untying the cord on his PJ pants, he sat down on the toilet. As he sat there, water began to seep out of the locking nut on the water line pipe, dripping down onto the floor. When Tod flushed the toilet a few moments later, it started trickling out in a steady stream, laced with blue toilet cleaner from the tank, forming a small pool on the bathroom floor. An unseen breeze made the surface of the puddle shimmer.

Slowly, the soapy pool started moving, running through the cracks in the tiled floor, creeping unnoticed towards Tod's feet.

Meanwhile, Tod was back in front of the mirror again. Smacking his lips, he picked up his dad's razor, weighted it thoughtfully in his hand, and then sleepily ran the sharp blade up his throat. In his semi-exhausted state, he forgot to use shaving gel. He winced as the dry razor nicked him, sending a stinging pain through his sleep-numbed neck. Blood started to seep out of the tiny cut on his throat, and Tod quickly grabbed a handful of tissues, staunching the flow before it dripped on the floor. He peered at himself in the mirror and pulled a disgusted face.

Great. Now he was even more attractive.

Stupid, stupid.

As Tod dabbed at his cut, peering at his neck in the mirror, a shadow fell across the bathroom wall behind him, as though someone was coming in through the door.

Alarmed, Tod whipped around to see...

Nothing. He was alone in the bathroom.

Shaking his head—how sleep deprived was he?—Tod put the razor down and owlishly peered at himself in the mirror. Then he picked up a pair of long, sharp nose hair trimmers and poked them inside his left nostril, starting to snip away.

On the floor, the stream of water ran closer to his feet.

The job finished, Tod reached out for the plug of the nearby radio and inserted it into the electrical socket. He turned on the radio. A John Denver song started playing.

Tod's heart thumped.

Plane crash guy. What the hell...?

Spooked, Tod grabbed the power cord and ripped it quickly out of the wall, silencing the song. He looked down at his hands. They were trembling.

Jeez, he had to get over this thing. This was just getting ridiculous.

\*\*\*

Over at the Browning household, Alex was also freaking out. His gaze flicked from the *Penthouse* model to the black and white photo of Clear, and back again, trying to come to terms with the sudden wash of feeling expanding in his chest. Finally succumbing to guilt, he sighed and put the newspaper back down on the desk. Picking up the *Penthouse* issue, he slid back in his chair and opened his desk drawer.

He was about to return the magazine to its hiding place when a loud *bang* on the window startled him. Alex spun round to see a huge pair of yellow, unearthly eyes peering in at him. A big, freaky bird had smashed into the window, an owl of some kind. Dazed, it teetered on the ledge awkwardly, flapping its huge wings as it fought to regain its balance on the sill, pecking and snapping at the glass.

Startled, Alex reflexively threw the *Penthouse* magazine at the window to scare off the bird. He missed, and the magazine hit the sill instead, its battered pages tearing apart on impact. A loose page fluttered up into the air and got sucked down into the whirling blades of the roaring fan on the windowsill.

There was a buzzing sound, and the remains of the page flew up into the air, torn into confetti.

Alex rolled his eyes. Nice one.

Outside the window, the owl flew off with a mirthful *squawk*, as though pleased with the mess it had just made.

Alex watched as a piece of paper fluttered high up into the air, twisting and turning like a falling autumn leaf, and landed face down on his knee. He picked it up and turned it over, ready to throw it in the trash... and froze.

It was a piece of the caption that read, "Tymme Has Come Today," torn from the centerfold he had been looking at.

The scrap of paper read simply "Tod."

Alex stared down at it, and his heart gave a great lurch. In his current state of mind, it seemed like some kind of warning to him. Not like his premonition, but still, it seemed significant. It was too much of a coincidence to be a... Well, a coincidence. Alex's breathing sped up, and he glanced quickly towards the window, and back again. It was late, but still, after the events of the last month, he couldn't be too careful.

Jumping up, he grabbed his jacket off the end of his bed and headed for the door, wondering how quickly he could get to Tod's house.

\*\*\*

Tod was still in the bathroom, going about his nightly ablutions. He brushed his hair, wondering vaguely why it still stuck straight up no matter how much gel he used on it. He had very happy hair. It always looked like it was having a party, all by itself, despite his best efforts to calm it down.

Sleepily, he wandered across the tiled floor to the bath. He had cleaned himself up a bit, but he was still feeling pretty skanky. Perhaps a shower before bed would help him sleep... It was humid and uncomfortably warm in the house, and he was burning up. A wash never did anyone any harm.

He pulled back the shower curtain to the bath and grimaced. His mother's nylons dangled from the retractable plastic clothesline that was strung across the tub.

Ew, gross! Why did she always have to do that? What was wrong with putting them in the drier, along with the rest of the laundry?

Now he had to, like, touch them and stuff. Tod made a face as he reached out towards the clothesline.

Beneath him, the trickle of soapy water crept towards his bare feet.

Gingerly, Tod began taking the nylons down so he could have his shower without being assaulted by them. He removed the first pair, dumping them down beside the tub, then took a step forward... and slipped on the puddle of water from the leaking toilet.

With a startled yelp, Tod plunged forward, landing neck first on the retractable clothesline and ripping it out of the end wall as he fell into the bath. The thin plastic cord pulled out to its full extension then snapped backwards, wrapping itself around Tod's throat and jerking him to a halt. It brought him up short four feet about the ground.

Tod hung suspended in midair in the bathtub, the wire-like cord pulled tight around his throat like a plastic noose. His eyes went wide with shock and fright as he frantically tried to regain his footing in the bath, which was slippery with water and soap scum.

He couldn't get his feet under him.

Tod started to choke.

As he struggled with the clothesline, trying to pull himself back up, he flung out an arm and knocked over a large bottle of shampoo, which spilled and coated the inside of the bath, flooding down. Tod's bare feet slipped and slid around in the spilled shampoo as he tried to brace himself against the side, but only succeeded in tightening the clothesline as he slipped further down into the bath. He threw out a hand and tried to grab onto the edge of the bath, frantic to push himself upright and slacken the noose around his neck. He slipped off immediately. Within seconds, his feet and hands were coated with slippery shampoo.

Try as he might, he couldn't get a foothold.

Tod gave a strangled *hiss* as the clothesline clamped down on his arteries and jugular, cutting off the blood supply to his brain. He tried to grab hold of the edge of the bath and pull himself up, but his hand slid away again and again. Blackness hovered on the edge of his vision as his brain screamed for oxygen, and the lights in the bathroom seemed to flicker as darkness swamped his mind.

Tod knew that he was about to pass out.

Panicking, he scrabbled at the noose around his neck, but it was buried too deeply in his flesh for his prying fingers to get a hold of it. He couldn't breathe, and his face turned purple as the noose got tighter by the second, cutting through skin and burying itself in the soft tissue of his throat. The pressure mounted in his head as the trapped blood built up, and a moment later the whites of his eyes flooded with red as the blood vessels in his eyeballs burst under the pressure.

Tod dangled there helplessly, feeling all his strength draining away as his blood flow stalled, his madly pumping heart unable to bypass the blockage. He had only been hanging there for seconds, but it felt like forever. He tried to cry out, but the noose had completely cut off his windpipe and he couldn't make a sound. He kicked out with his legs, beating them against the bath in the hope of attracting the attention of his parents, but the bathroom door was shut, containing the sounds of his struggle.

Downstairs, Mr and Mrs Waggner slumbered on in blissful silence. Up on the mantelpiece, their antique gold-plated clock ticked on as usual. It was five minutes to midnight.

In the bathroom, Tod made a last desperate effort to free himself. Despite his dimming vision, he spied the nose hair trimmers balanced on the edge of the counter. With the last of his strength, Tod reached a numb hand out for them. His lungs were bursting, and he knew this was his last chance. If he could just get hold of them, he could cut the cord above him and free himself. He had just survived a plane crash for fuck's sake! He couldn't die like this.

His groping fingers waved in the air, but the scissors were sadistically just an inch too far away. Tod kicked and struggled frantically, reaching out for them with a last burst of effort. His head felt like it was exploding, and a creeping numbness swept through his limbs, stealing away sensation and short-circuiting his motor functions in a blaze of fire.

Then the blackness rolled forward and claimed him, and Tod's thoughts turned belly-up and went down a third and final time. His

hand dropped back down again, his fingers twitching, and his head lolled to one side.

Tod slumped down in the bath and died.

On the bathroom floor, the puddle of water shivered, then eerily began to retreat, flowing back into the base of the toilet like a murderer slipping out of sight.

Within moments, it had vanished completely.

Tod's lifeless body twitched a final time. Then the bathroom curtains drifted slowly out toward the closed window, and were still.

\*\*\*

The wind gusted through the dark trees surrounding the Wagner property as Alex strode quickly down the street towards his best friend's house. He knew it was insane for him to be this worried, but at the same time, he couldn't rest without knowing that Tod was safe. The piece of paper the fan had torn from the magazine had really spooked him, and he needed to see Tod with his own eyes to make sure that he was okay. One part of him knew that it was just a stupid bit of paper—it was just a coincidence that the fan had torn out that part of the caption and then dropped it right onto his knee. At the same time, he had to be sure.

After all, he was "Premonition Boy" now, wasn't he?

Alex shook his head at his own fears as he neared Tod's house. This was crazy, right? Boy, was Mr Wagner going to rip the shit outta him when he turned up on his doorstep, ringing the bell and waking everyone up in the middle of the night. Tod would never let him live it down, and would probably make fun of him all week at school.

It would be worth it. He was never going to ignore his instincts again. He liked to think that he learned from his mistakes, and hell, this last month had been one big screwy lesson, if nothing else.

Alex walked past the familiar fence and trees that flanked his friend's house, hoping that he wasn't about to make too big a fool of himself. The smell of jasmine hung heavily on the night air, and Alex breathed it in deeply, feeling a thousand familiar memories stir in his

head. He had been coming to Tod's house for years, ever since the pair of them had met in junior high, and every detail of the driveway was as familiar to him as the back of his own hand. He could find his way here blindfolded.

Alex took a couple more steps forward, rounding the big misshapen tree that stood like a sentry on the end of the driveway. As kids, he and Tod had often climbed this tree, playing lookout with toy guns and paint pellets, and with Mrs Waggner's colored handkerchiefs tied around their foreheads pretending to be freedom fighters.

As the house came into sight, Alex slowed.

A whirling red and yellow light was flickering through the hedge.

Fear seized Alex's heart in an electric grip. At this time of night, that could only mean one thing.

Alex started jogging, and then broke into an all-out run as his panic mounted. Tearing around the corner, he pelted up the front drive and stopped, sweating and out of breath. Horror filled his face as he surveyed the scene before him.

Oh, no! No, no, no, no...

The yard was swarming with police and paramedics. A Sullivan County, NY Sheriff's patrol car was parked in a flower bed beside an unmarked sedan, and two uniformed officers walked slowly down the front pathway, carrying defibrillation equipment. Tod's two dogs were going nuts.

Alex ran towards a nearby paramedic and seized him by the sleeve. "What happened?" he blurted. "Where's Tod?"

The paramedic shrugged, and Alex was unsure whether this meant he didn't know or he didn't care. Impatiently, he turned around, searching for someone who could give him an answer.

Behind the ambulance, Agents Schreck and Weine stood by the door of the sedan. Their faces froze when they saw Alex. They turned to one another, sharing a look that suggested a deepening suspicion.

Alex hardly noticed them. All of his attention was currently focused on the covered gurney being wheeled down the front pathway towards the waiting ambulance. His eyes flew back to the house, a silent, selfish prayer on his lips. Then he sagged in despair

as Mr and Mrs Waggner emerged from the front door and walked down after the gurney, weeping, arms around one another.

No.

Not Tod.

This couldn't be happening!

Alex's eye was magnetically drawn toward the covered gurney, hoping against hope that he was wrong, that Tod wasn't dead, that perhaps a visiting aunt had had a heart attack and that any minute now, Tod would come bounding out of the house and get all freaked out to see him there. He felt weird, unreal. This had to be a dream.

It had to be.

"Alex!" hissed a voice.

Alex glanced around, jolted, and saw the pale, shadowy figure of Clear Rivers peering out at him from behind a nearby tree. She was dressed in blue jeans and a white tee, in stark contrast to the somber black clothes she normally wore to school.

"Get outta here!" Clear whispered, her blue eyes flashing a warning.

Confused and frightened, Alex turned back, suddenly registering the FBI agents who were staring at him like cobras waiting to strike. What? Did they think he was somehow responsible for this? How could he have caused this if he had only just arrived?

A metallic clacking sound ripped Alex's attention back to the house. The gurney was being loaded into the ambulance. Instantly forgetting Clear, Alex tottered on unsteady legs towards the gurney, and stopped by the van, pale and nauseous with fear. He wanted to look—needed to look—but couldn't bring himself to move any closer to the covered gurney.

He took a deep breath, trying to steel himself to lift the cover and take a peek.

On the pathway a little further up, the dark, hunched form of Mr Waggner paused in shock to see Alex, standing in his driveway by the gurney containing the body of his dead son. His face turned to thunder and he started striding purposefully back down the drive, tailed by his weeping wife.

The Browning kid was here? After everything that had happened?



How dare he!

Mr Waggnner marched up to Alex as though about to attack him, stopping barely three feet away, his whole body vibrating with anger and grief. Mrs Waggnner hung back, her crumpled face filling with fear at the sight of Alex.

Alex made eye contact with the bereaved man, and a chill shot through him at the dead, empty expression on his face.

"Didn't you see' it?" Mr Waggnner asked.

Alex remained silent, hurt.

"Couldn't you 'predict' it? Couldn't you read his mind?" A single tear slid down Mr Waggnner's gaunt, unshaven cheek.

Alex backed away, swallowing hard, willing his voice not to shake. "What... what happened?"

Mr Waggnner's voice was as dead as his face. "You caused Tod so much guilt over George staying on the plane, that... he took his own life."

Behind him, the paramedics strapped Tod's covered body to the gurney, and prepared to lift him into the back of the van.

"No..." Alex was stunned. "Look! He wouldn't do that!"

Mr Waggnner stared at him blankly for a second, and then started to turn away, dismissing him utterly. Alex clenched his fists, angry now. "He told me that we'd be friends again after *you* got better!" he shouted. "After you got over George! Why would he make plans with me if he was thinking about killing himself?"

Mr Waggnner paused, then half turned back to Alex, fixing him with a cold, bitter look. "All his mother and I will ever know is that we wouldn't have lost our youngest son if you had told our oldest to get off the plane."

Alex was rocked as if he had just taken a punch to the face. There it was. He'd finally said it. The words hung in the humid night air like bloody daggers.

Mr Waggnner gave Alex a final, haunted look before turning his back on him.

Alex stepped forward haltingly, ready to argue his case. "Mr Waggnner!"

Slipping an arm around his wife's heaving shoulders, Mr Waggner slowly started guiding her back up the steps to his empty house.

Alex stood there, helplessly, alone, watching the covered gurney being loaded into the ambulance. This was too much. The world shimmered and seemed to drain away from him, leaving him in an echoing, hollow vacuum. He wanted to run, but his legs were rooted to the spot as though he had an iron stake through his spine, his frozen muscles gleefully determined to make him stand here and watch this sick drama play out till the end.

He felt eyes on him, and his gaze flicked quickly to the right where he registered the disapproving glares of the two FBI agents. They stood beside the paramedic van like two watchful sentries, practically vibrating with accusation. After a moment, they too turned away from him and moved back towards their vehicle, dismissing him.

*Slam! Slam!*

Alex jumped as the ambulance doors were banged shut, then slowly turned, searching for what appeared to be his only ally in her place behind the tree.

But Clear Rivers had gone.

# FIVE

The following day, a soft summer breeze rustled the leaves on the trees as Alex made his way up the leaf-strewn driveway towards Clear Rivers's house. It was morning, and he'd been out walking all night. The woodland was alive with sounds and color, a rich, scent of leaf mold and wet earth filling the air, bringing with it the promise of rain. Sunlight dappled the winding road in glowing streaks, but Alex hardly noticed all the natural beauty surrounding him.

His thoughts were firmly fixed on another beauty altogether.

As Alex approached the small, unkempt house nestled on the edge of the woods, the breeze blew again, a little harder. A single, yellowing leaf dropped from a high branch and fluttered downwards in big, wide circles. It landed on the path right in front of Alex, and he paused for a moment, eyeing it intently, before stooping to pick it up and examine it. His senses thrummed with warning. Could this be another sign?

It was a leaf. What did that mean?

"Almost autumn."

Alex looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. Clear stood in the mouth of the open garage, a welding gun dangling from one hand. She was wearing torn jeans with the back pocket missing, and heavy, black work boots stamped with the name of some outdoor supply firm. The interior of the garage behind her was packed with piles of scrap metal and tangled artwork, some of it looking new, and some of it rusted into tangled skeletons of moldering blue iron. A scruffy looking German shepherd sat on the floor nearby, the angle of its body indicating that it was waiting for Clear to finish her work so it could be fed. As Alex approached, it bounded to its feet with a low *woof*, and trotted over to investigate.

Switching off her welding gun, Clear removed her goggles and gazed at Alex steadily, almost as though she had been expecting him to turn up here in the middle of nowhere, unannounced. She was not displeased to see him.

"Only the end of June," replied Alex, reaching down to pet the dog. It snuffled at him warily, then suddenly snapped at his fingers, laying back its ears. A low growl of warning rumbled in its throat, and its fur stood up all the way along its back.

Startled, Alex jerked his hand away. Mangy mutt.

Clear shrugged, not seeming to notice the dog's reaction to Alex. "Yeah, but everything's always in transition. If you focus, even now, just one week into summer, you can almost feel autumn coming."

She swept off her painter's cap, and long tresses of glossy hair tumbled around her shoulders. It had always looked kind of mousy to Alex in class, but outdoors in the warm morning light, it was almost chestnut colored. Clear turned to Alex, running a hand casually through her hair.

"Kinda like being able to see into the future," she said without malice.

Alex considered this, shading his eyes against the early morning sun, then asked the question that had been burning inside him for the last twelve hours. "Why were you at Tod's house last night?"

Clear gazed at Alex for a second, then abruptly turned away and started gathering up her welding gear.

"Look, I've seen enough TV to know that the FBI doesn't investigate teen suicides." Her voice was almost angry.

She grabbed an armload of equipment and marched into her garage. Alex followed her, gazing around him in curiosity. The garage was filled with dozens of abstract metal sculptures, all of which were pretty bad, constructed out of plastic and scrap iron. Teen angst poorly communicated. Their art teacher would be proud of her.

Clear hung her jacket on a nail and then swung around to face Alex. "But they were there last night, so that means one: they still don't have a clue what caused the crash; two, they haven't ruled out anything; and the fact that seven people got off the plane is probably weird enough, not to mention that one of those people had a vision, or whatever, of it exploding minutes before it *did* explode." Clear paused, half in shadow, backlit by the dusty window behind her.

This was the first time Alex had heard her talk so boldly. A note of warning crept into her voice as she went on.

"And it doesn't help that the visionary's friend just committed suicide."

Alex eyed her warily, unsure of what to say to this. There was nothing he *could* say.

"Why were *you* there last night?" he repeated doggedly. It was all he really wanted to know. If she would just answer that one question then he would be outta there.

That *was* the only reason why he'd come, after all; to find out the answer to this simple question.

Clear opened her mouth as though to reply, then hesitated and turned away again. Alex watched her in frustration as she walked over to a side bench, which was covered in a mess of nails and scrap iron, and jerked her chin at one of the half-finished sculptures.

"Know what this is?"

Alex warily checked out the sculpture. It was essentially a giant spring, topped by a rough profile of a head made out of a twisted piece of steel and filled with broken colored glass. The whole thing put together formed the rough shape of a question mark. It swung gently back and forth, creaking in the breeze.

Alex circled it warily, stalling for time and unsure about what to say without offending Clear.

"This a, er..."

What did she want from him? Praise? An analysis? A written breakdown of her mental state based on the inherent form and balance of the sculpture?

"Um... It's a springy head guy?" he hazarded, playing it safe.

Clear sighed as though to say, "Thanks a lot." She gestured up at the metal head.

"It's a piece of debris from the plane. I went to the shore off the crash site and it washed up on the beach."

Alex's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he regarded Clear with a new respect. "You went there? I thought it was off-limits."

"It is." Clear shrugged, giving him a sideways glance. She fingered the lucky Spanish coin strung on a piece of black cord around her throat. "That didn't stop me. Shouldn't stop you."

Alex approached the sculpture and gently touched the piece of the plane, almost expecting to feel something more than just plain cold metal under his fingers. Then he transferred his troubled gaze back to Clear, trying one last time.

"Why were you there last night?" Even to his own ears he sounded like a stuck record. He wished that she would just answer the damn question so he could leave.

Clear dropped her gaze and began distractedly cleaning her brushes in a can of turpentine, the sunlight from the window flickering over her face. Alex watched her impatiently. It was a simple enough question.

Wasn't it?

Clear returned the can of turpentine to a shelf, then waved her brush at the sculpture. "Know *what* it is?"

Alex cocked his eyebrow at her and then tactfully shook his head "no". The sooner she got off this art kick, the better.

"It's you," said Clear.

Alex looked at her quickly, but there was no trace of sarcasm on her face. He tensed, uncomfortable, carefully keeping his face blank.

Okay, he kinda asked for that one...

"Not a likeness," amended Clear quickly after seeing Alex's expression. "It's how you make me feel, Alex."

Alex stared at the twisted, freakish sculpture. "I'm sorry," he said with feeling.

Clear ignored him, dreamily reaching up a hand to stroke the giant spring. "Like you, the sculpture doesn't even know what, or why, it is. Reluctant to take form, and yet... creating an absolute, but incomprehensible attraction."

Clear swung round to face Alex, her eyes burning with an inner ferocity that was startling to behold.

"In four years of high school, we haven't said a word to each other." She stepped towards Alex, staring into his eyes. "But at that moment... on the plane... *I felt what you felt.*"

Alex backed off from the intensity of her gaze. Clear turned to follow him, unrelenting.

"I didn't know where all those emotions were coming from until you started freaking out. I didn't see what you saw, but I felt it."

Embarrassed, Alex looked away. This was fast getting into freaky shit territory. Clear stepped up close to Alex-kissing distance close—and continued in a harsh whisper.

"And you can still feel it, can't you? Something from that day is still with you. I know, because I can still feel you." Her gaze locked with his, a blue storm breaking in her eyes. "*That's* why I was there last night."

Alex held her gaze for a heartbeat and then turned away, stalling for time, seeking solace in the normalcy of the garage. The shelves were lined with everyday, ordinary things: tools, pots of paint, work cloths. A rack of brightly colored bottles drew his attention and he walked over to them, agitated.

"You know, I've never dealt with death before." He picked up a crystal bottle and made a big show of examining it closely, turning it over in his hands, enjoying the feeling of its cold smoothness against his skin. "All of this... This could all be in our heads." He swept a hand through his sandy hair, trying to express the inexpressible. "It just feels like it's all around us."

"It?" asked Clear, raising an eyebrow.

Alex gazed at the dusty bottles, trying to gather his thoughts and put into words the suspicions floating around in his head. An idea sparked, and he put down the bottle and marched over to Clear, excited and afraid at the same time.

"What if Tod... is just the first of us?"

Clear's expression flickered, revealing a shot of naked apprehension before hardening again into her characteristic scowl.

"Is that something you're feeling?"

"I don't know." Alex genuinely didn't. "I wish I could just see him... one more time, then, maybe... I would know."

Clear stared at him, then her mouth twisted into a sudden, impish grin.

"Then let's go see him," she said simply.

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Moonlight shone on the roof of the funeral home as Clear and Alex shinned up the side of the building and climbed out onto the roof. It was cold and the night air was damp. Alex was shitting bricks at the thought of falling and impaling himself on the rusty iron railings below. Clear ignored his fears, moving surefootedly up the slick roof; quiet and confident as a cat. Alex got the distinct impression that she'd done this before. He followed her hesitantly, throwing occasional questioning glances at her as she negotiated the steep terrain, still unable to believe that they were actually doing this.

Of all the ambitions he had in his life, breaking into a morgue wasn't one of them.

They quietly clambered over the wet slates, careful not to fall, until they reached the big skylight that was the centerpiece of the domed side building. Carefully, Clear levered the stained glass skylight out of its metal moorings and heaved it aside. Placing the skylight cover down on the roof beside her, she paused for a moment, listening for signs of life, then sat down on the edge of the gaping black hole and lowered herself in.

Inside, she landed quietly on the wooden lid of a polished mahogany display casket. Unfazed, she turned and gazed upwards expectantly, watching Alex as he grumbled and shoved his way through the skylight, using his knee to slow his descent. He hung from the sill for a moment, arms shaking with the unaccustomed effort, before dropping into a less-than-graceful heap inside the open coffin beside Clear. Dust billowed around him as he rose to his feet and brushed himself off, giving Clear an unhappy glance as he saw where he had landed.

Clear's mouth twitched upwards in reply before she gracefully leapt down off the coffin.

"Gives me a rush," she whispered.

Alex peered around him in alarm at the glinting array of empty caskets. And he'd thought that *he* was a freak.

He waved a hand at the room. "This place?"

Clear shook her head impatiently. "Doin' something I'm not supposed to. C'mon!"



With a mischievous smile, she padded over to the main door, passing by the unsettling reception area filled with dusty plastic flowers, gold candelabra, and plaster cherubs and angels. A bronze plaque by the door read in heavy block type:

Mt Abraham Funeral Home  
The Journey's End  
William Bludworth  
Intermediary

Alex watched her in surprise, impressed by this new, daring version of Clear. He never knew that she had it in her.

Breaking into the morgue itself took a matter of seconds. Alex's stolen mortician's tool made short work of the lock, as he looped the hooked end over the door knob on the other side and gave it a twist. He'd learned that one from Tod, although he'd never dreamed in a million years that this would be the first practical use he'd have for it.

The lock sprung open with a *clunk* and a creak. Cautiously, they pushed open the heavy metal door and made their way into the morgue.

Inside, they found themselves in a large, echoing room lined with shelves and trays of scary looking instruments. Medical diagrams hung on the walls, and bottles full of multicolored liquids jostled for space on the shelves with dying houseplants and ancient textbooks. It was so cold that their breath plumed on the air, and Alex's eye roved around the room before settling on a sight he never really thought he'd see—Tod's dead body.

He hung back for a moment, trying to prepare himself. His friend's corpse was lying on a porcelain slab in the middle of the room, half covered by a sheet. He—no, *it*—had creepy looking tubes attached to the veins in its arms and legs. A red, translucent fluid drained from the body into large glass containers stashed on a stainless steel trolley. On a tray nearby sat a selection of what looked like medieval torture instruments, as well as a large roll of heavy-duty kitchen paper with cheerful pink flowers printed on.

Alex discarded the mortician's tool he had used to pick the lock, gingerly setting it down on one of the work surfaces behind a large stack of oil paints. He hadn't a clue what the tool was used for, and he had a strong feeling that he really didn't want to know.

Cautiously, he approached the body, horrified and fascinated at the same time.

Tod's skin was a deathly bluish-white, covered in bruises and burst blood vessels. His deathly pallor was enlivened by four deep red welts around his neck. Alex screwed up his face. That was something he hadn't wanted to see. In a place like this, some things were best left to the imagination, and Alex's imagination was working overtime as it was.

He peered closer, and frowned.

Hey, the dude was wearing make-up!

Somebody had done a hasty job at attempting to brighten Tod's dead face, but they had used way too much blusher. His lips were a garish red, and the foundation was laid on so thickly that his skin had turned orange.

The overall effect was so comical that Alex almost laughed.

"That him? Why'd they make him up like Michael Jackson?" asked Clear, fingering a rouge-smeared paintbrush left on a bench.

Alex ignored her, gazing down at Tod in morbid fascination. He'd never seen a real dead body before. It was so weird. This... body... used to be a living, breathing person, and now what was it? Just a shell with nothing in it. It wasn't even Tod anymore; it was more like a wax dummy that looked like him. All the life, all the expression; everything that made him Tod was gone from him, leaving nothing but a hunk of pale meat, and not a very big one at that.

Alex shivered. What was a person anyway? Just flesh and blood and bone and tissue, with a spark inside it that made it move.

Tod's spark had very definitely left the building.

"That's him," he told Clear, "but... he's not here. Whatever it was that made him Tod is gone."

Alex peered closer at Tod. Even in sleep, Tod had never looked like this. His body was far too still to be—

*Blam!* Tod's hand suddenly jerked up into the air. Alex and Clear leapt backwards, clutching at one another in fright.

"Oh my God! OH MY GOD!"

"Tod, you fucking asshole! You think this is funny, you fucking dick?" yelled Alex.

"Please, don't yell..."

Alex and Clear spun around in new terror at the sound of a third voice behind them. A tall, stately African American man in his early fifties stood quietly behind them in the shadows, dressed in a navy-blue shirt and tie.

Mr Bludworth, they presumed.

"You'll wake the dead," Mr Bludworth finished. He flashed a dry mortician's smile, pleased by his own joke.

Alex gulped, fighting to control the racing of his heart. The guy must've been standing there the whole time and they hadn't even noticed him. Alex pointed back at Tod's body, struggling to form words.

"Why'd his hand do that?"

"Chemicals in the vascular flush create cadaveric spasm," the mortician said smoothly.

Alex nodded thoughtfully, not understanding a word. As his jangled nerves settled, it occurred to him that he had been busted. He cleared his throat nervously, offering an explanation.

"I'm... a friend of his. His best friend. See, his father—"

"I know who you are," said Mr Bludworth curtly. He cast his dark gaze over Alex, an understanding glint in the depths of his pupils. Alex saw that he wasn't about to get whaled on and relaxed slightly, although he still kept his back to the door, unnerved by this strange, spooky man.

Behind him, Clear moved toward Tod's body and examined his torn-up neck, looking for clues. The larger wounds had been filled with wax and covered with skin colored greasepaint, but upon closer inspection, she could see dozens of crescent-shaped marks above and below the large cut made by the wire.

She pointed. "What are all those tiny marks?"

"Cuticle lacerations caused by pulling at the wire," answered Mr Blutworth. From his clipped tone, it seemed as though he answered questions of this nature all day every day.

Alex peered closer. "If he was pulling at the wire, he wasn't trying to kill himself." His eyes widened as he realized what the deal was. "It was an accident!" he breathed.

Mr Blutworth shook his head. "In death, there are no accidents. No coincidences. No mishaps." He gave a slow, chilling smile as he looked up at Alex. "And no... escapes."

Abruptly, Mr Blutworth moved to Tod's body on the draining table, and started disconnecting the tubes that were connecting the body to the embalming chemicals. Cloudy fluid dribbled out of the bloody holes onto the table, and Alex screwed up his face in disgust. This was what happened to you when you died? No way was he ever dying!

A flush of fear ran through Alex as he realized how close he'd come to this terrible, macabre fate. Being buried was bad enough, without having to go through all this crap first. He pictured himself lying there on the pallet, tubes draining the blood from his body, and shivered. No open casket for him. Just instant cremation. The thought of someone burning his body had always given him the screaming heebie-jeebies. What if he was still alive when they burned him? What if the doctor made a mistake? But now he knew absolutely that this was what he wanted.

He wondered if he could make a note in his will to get someone to drive a stake through his heart first, like you did with vampires, just to be on the safe side.

As Alex watched, Mr Blutworth turned away from the body on the table, studying him shrewdly. His dark gaze was piercing, as though reading his very thoughts.

"What you have to realize is that we're all just a mouse that a cat has by the tail," he said in a conversational tone of voice, while unplugging the main vascular pump. "Every single move we make, from the mundane to the monumental: the red light we stop at, or run; the people we have sex with, or work with; the airplane we ride,

or walk out of..." His eyes flicked towards Clear, then back to Alex again. "It's all a part of Death's sadistic design, leading to the grave."

Alex's ears pricked up. This all sounded very familiar to him. He stared up at the mortician in sudden excitement as his mind started to join the dots.

"A design? Are you saying... if you could figure out this design... you could cheat death?"

Mr Bludworth considered this, staring at the blue-white corpse of the young teen on the table before him. He felt no pity or remorse for the dead kid; he just knew that the powers that be had righted what had been wronged. It was regrettable that the boy was so young, but had he not died, things could have been far, far worse...

He turned back to Alex, sizing him up, and feeling the interconnected threads of the universe tugging at him, like the synapses in a giant celestial brain. "Alex. You already did that by getting off the plane. Your friend's... departure... shows that death has a new design." Mr Bludworth gave a creepy half-smile. "Now you've gotta figure out how, and when, it's coming back at you."

Alex stared at him in shock.

"Play your hunch, Alex. If you think you can get away with it." Mr Bludworth turned his emotionless black eyes back to the body on the table. "But be aware, the risk of cheating the plan, of disrespecting the design, could incite a horrifying fury that would terrorize even the Grim Reaper. Turning, he licked his lips and leaned closer to the pair of huddled teens, his eyes gleaming in the low light. "And you don't even want to fuck with *that* Mack Daddie."

With that, he gave a flick of his wrist and yanked out the main tube connecting Tod's corpse to the tank of embalming fluid. A foot-long needle popped out of Tod's spinal column with a hideous sucking sound, and pinkish-yellow fluid spurted onto the table. Clear and Alex turned away in disgust, totally grossed out.

The mortician let out a short, barking laugh at the look on their faces. He looked as though he hadn't enjoyed himself so much in weeks.

"Okay, then," Alex said in a small voice, his eyes riveted to the gleaming needle. He rubbed his hands together then made a gesture

towards the door. "I'm sorry we broke in."

"No harm, no foul," said Mr Bludworth pleasantly, cleaning his needle.

Alex grabbed Clear's arm and started pulling her towards the door.

"I'll see you soon," grinned Mr Bludworth, his eyes glinting.

Alex stared at him in horror.

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That night, Alex lay in bed, staring fitfully at the ceiling. The room was totally, utterly silent. The four walls seemed to be pressing in on him, and the air in the room was flat and lifeless, as though it contained no oxygen.

Sweating, he threw his lightweight blanket aside, mopping at his brow with the back of his hand. This was beyond ridiculous. He had been lying in bed trying to sleep for almost five hours now with no luck, and was beginning to despair of getting any shut-eye at all before morning. His skin was burning up, even though inside he felt cold as a block of ice. He'd had a hot bath when he'd returned from the funeral home, but even that didn't warm him up.

Alex blew a drop of sweat off the end of his nose, flopping his head weakly to one side. Maybe it was the humidity that was keeping him awake. Or maybe it was the fact that he had just seen his best friend lying dead at the morgue...

Yeah, that would probably do it.

Alex flopped restlessly over and rolled out of bed, pacing to the window. Throwing it wide open, he paused a moment and gazed blearily out at the night sky. He wondered if Tod was out there somewhere, laughing at him. Then he hopped back into bed and went back to staring at the ceiling.

The dangling puppets hanging from his window, swung gently back and forth as fresh, cool air flooded into the bedroom. Alex breathed it in deeply, noting the faint tang of rain and wet earth in the air, and yawned, stretching. Then he sank his head down on the soft, soft pillow, and after a few moments, his eyes fluttered closed. The cool air relaxed him, and his mind spun off into the distance as

heavy blackness finally claimed him, dragging him down deeper and deeper into the clinging depths of sleep.

As his consciousness drained away, he felt like he was falling, picking up speed as though his mind was zooming down a long, deep tunnel. He dimly noticed a bright light off to one side of the tunnel, and with a little concentration found that he was able to move towards it.

Wheeee! This was kinda fun.

The light shot towards him, and Alex realized that he was traveling very fast indeed. He knew that he wasn't in any physical danger as he was asleep, but still, he instinctively tried to slow his fall. The harder he tried, the faster he fell, until he was streaking towards the light at what felt like hundreds of miles per hour.

With a rush, he fell into the light and his whole body jerked, jumping in his sleep. His breathing sped up and he cringed away from the blinding white light that surrounded him, shining through his closed eyelids. Although it was intrusive, it didn't feel dangerous, and after a few moments Alex cautiously opened his eyes, blinking painfully, and looked around him.

His consciousness reeled. He was outside, lying in a field. The white light had been the summer sun, beaming down from a rich, blue sky and shining into his eyes. He was surrounded by lush grass and tall, graceful trees, swaying gently in the summer breeze. An aircraft droned overhead, dragging a white vapor trail behind it.

Alex rolled over on the grass and yawned, wondering how long he'd been lying there. He sleepily rubbed his eyes, feeling his tiredness evaporate like water on a hot stove. Licking his dry lips, he sat upright. Cut grass clung to his gray, cotton T-shirt, and Alex idly brushed it off before rising to his feet.

He stretched mightily, peering around him.

He was in the main playing field of the school. At the back of the field was a wooded area, leading through into the suburbs where most of the students lived. Over to his left was the Mount Abraham High School, its blocky architecture recognizable even through his sleep-blurred vision. From all around him came the chatter of

students laughing and playing in the distance, although from where he was sitting there was no one in sight.

A strange feeling went through Alex, as though there was somewhere he was meant to be and something he was meant to be doing. He screwed up his eyes against the light, wracking his brain, but couldn't quite put his finger on it.

School.

That was probably it. He was supposed to be back by now, in class, but he must've fallen asleep on the grass and missed the end-of-lunchtime bell.

That meant, he was probably in big trouble with the teachers.

Anxiety filled him. Alex began quickly walking back toward the school, picking up his pace as he loped easily over the soft, springy, clean grass towards the main school block. He hoped that he hadn't been missed yet, and rolled his eyes as he realized that he'd probably blown his chances of sitting next to Christa again.

Typical.

As he approached the school, something caught his eye. In front of the school, on the main lawn, several hundred chairs had been set up in a half ring. A covered memorial sat in front of the chairs, and a small stage was set off to one side bearing five chairs. Directly in front of the group of seats was a wooden podium.

All the seats were empty. There was no one in sight.

Alex cocked his head and studied the seats as he walked closer, wondering where everybody was. The sun was high overhead, which meant that it was the middle of the school day, but he'd never seen the place so empty.

As Alex got closer, he noticed a single, solitary figure hunched over the podium. Even from a distance he had no difficulty in recognizing who it was.

It was Tod.

Again, something cold brushed at the back of Alex's mind—some kind of warning—but he ignored it, glad to see his friend. Besides, if Tod was out here, that meant that he was okay and that lessons hadn't started yet.



Thank Christ for that. Last thing he needed was detention from Ms Lewton. Lovely though she was, he'd much rather be out playing basketball with George and Tod.

Alex walked up to the podium and waved up at Tod. "Hey," he said.

Tod looked at him and frowned, putting his finger to his lips. "Shhh!" Then he went back to leafing through the thick pile of his speech notes spread before him on the podium.

"What..." Alex dropped his voice and tried again. "What's happening?"

In reply, Tod pointed a finger across the school grounds without looking up. Alex turned around, squinting into the sun. A group of six silent figures were making their way towards them across the lawn, carrying something on their shoulders.

As they came closer, Alex saw that it was a coffin.

Alex turned back to Tod, but suddenly he was no longer there. Alex looked around for his friend before spotting him, incredibly, several hundred yards away, striding up to the coffin bearers.

"Hey! Wait up!" Alex took off after Tod, jogging across the grass. The wind kicked up as he hurried towards his friend, making the long grass ripple beneath his feet. Thunder sounded on the cusp of his hearing, and Alex glanced over his shoulder uneasily as he jogged. The sky was perfectly clear with not a cloud in sight. Shrugging to himself, Alex turned back to the coffin bearers and then stopped dead in his tracks.

Tod had gone.

A strange, niggling sense of fear crept over Alex as he stood turning his head this way and that, searching for his friend. A few moments later, the coffin bearers reached him, striding somberly past. Alex saw that it was an open coffin and peered warily into it, but it was empty.

Weird.

A door banged somewhere behind him in the distance. Alex spun around to see the dark figure of Tod disappearing inside the main entrance to the school.

"Tod!"

Gripped by a sudden panic, Alex took off across the lawn, haring towards the school. He didn't know why, but he had the strangest sense that if he let Tod out of his sight, he would never see him again.

The main building loomed ahead of him, huge and silent. The windows were all closed, which was unusual at this time of day. Usually, the school was alive with the sound of students rushing around, calling to each other in the hallways and laughing in the yard, but right now the place was quiet. Alex quickly mounted the stone steps and flung open the main doors.

It was cold inside the school lobby. Alex marched through the corridors as fast as he could, glancing around as he walked. He'd check the cafeteria first, where Tod was always to be found, idling over his packed lunch and ogling some humorously inappropriate girl or other. If he wasn't in there he'd go to the library, where Tod was always sent for detention, and if that failed, then he'd just have to start asking people.

At the far end of the corridor was a pair of larger wooden doors that led through to the cafeteria. It was much colder down here, and Alex noticed that his breath was pluming on the air as he walked.

Then... *there!* He caught the briefest flash of Tod as he vanished through the doors at the far end. Excited, Alex ran after him. Reaching the doors, he pushed his way through, and then drew back, confused.

He was back in the funeral home.

Alex's brow creased as he took a cautious step into the room, all his senses alert for any signs of danger. Somehow, things were different in here now. The air was stale and musty, and a thick layer of dust covered everything, as though nobody had been in here for years. The bottles that lined the shelves were in disarray, and all the charts had been ripped off the walls.

Thankfully, all the embalming slabs were empty.

Alex's breath hung in the air as he walked forward, hearing his footsteps ring on the polished stone floor, and warily eyeing the various trays of instruments.

There was still no sign of Tod. He seemed to have vanished completely.

Alex wandered around the edge of the room, suspiciously eyeing the large rack of man-sized steel refrigeration drawers that sat back from the main room behind the embalming slabs. It was a closed room, so Tod had to be in here somewhere. He was probably hiding. That was just like him. Any minute now he would probably jump out and give Alex a heart attack, and then stagger around laughing for ten minutes or so at his own cleverness. The guy was such a dickhead sometimes it made Alex's head ache.

Alex approached the largest set of drawers and hung back, listening for an intake of breath or Tod's characteristic muffled giggle—any sound that would give him away. He ran a finger through the dust on the nearest drawers, checking the fronts for any kind of labels that might give him a clue of what—or who was in them, but there was nothing under the dust but plain bare metal.

Only one thing for it.

Plucking up his nerves, Alex put his hand on the handle of the nearest drawer, feeling the cold steel of the handle leach the warmth from his hand. It was already open a crack, which made it the most likely place that Tod would be.

With a cry of triumph, Alex flung the drawer open.

It was empty.

Alex started to close the drawer when he noticed something lurking at the back. He reached into the drawer and pulled it out, turning the object over in his hands, frowning.

It was a wooden puppet of a boy, its face painted with bright rouge. Its strings were hopelessly tangled around its own throat.

Weirder and weirder.

Alex tried the rest of the drawers in quick succession, working his way down the line, but they were all empty.

Puzzled, Alex dropped the puppet down onto a bench and turned around, wondering where the hell Tod had got to. There was nowhere else for him to hide.

As he stood there pondering, he noticed a strange smell. Alex sniffed and made a face, feeling all the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The smell was cloying and sickly, with a nauseatingly pungent undertone; the kind of smell you really didn't want to

encounter when hunting in the shed for your escaped pet rabbit who had been missing for some time. He turned around and noticed a small door he hadn't seen before, which presumably led off to a back room. The smell seemed to be coming from there.

Alex walked towards the door, wrinkling his nose at the smell. It got stronger as he approached, and it took all of Alex's willpower to actually reach the door.

Tod *had* to be in there. It was the only other place big enough to hide in.

Trying to breathe through his mouth, Alex opened the door, then reeled backwards in wonder.

The door opened out into a vast, echoing space. A giant room was revealed, so tall and long that its far walls disappeared into infinity, and it was packed full of machinery. A complex system of pulleys, drive belts and counterweights filled the air with a *whirring* and a *clacking* of gears. It was, Alex realized, a giant version of the machinery used by airports to sort and deliver people's baggage.

Except this wasn't baggage that was being sorted...

Alex shrank back, clapping his hand over his mouth in horror.

These were bodies.

Hundreds and hundreds of bodies lay in piles on the floor and on sorting racks, ordered according to size. The bodies were fetid, decomposing; some of them missing limbs and eyes. Most of them were burnt. The smell in the place was indescribable, made worse by the heat coming from what looked like a giant blast furnace at the far end of the room. A black carpet of flies clung to the floor and took off with a supine ripple and *buzz* every time a body was removed from the racks by the giant claw that hung suspended from the ceiling. As Alex watched, the claw came down from the ceiling, grasped a body, jerked it into the air and deposited it on a moving conveyer belt, which whisked it towards the furnace.

What the hell *was* this place?

Appalled, yet strangely fascinated, Alex edged closer to the nearest rack and stared down at the bodies. They stared back up at him, bloodied and mangled, their clothing blackened and crumbling. Alex's eye traveled along the rack, and then stopped with a jolt as he

saw something heart-breaking. The tiny body of a newborn baby lay at the far end, burnt to a crisp. Its blackened eye sockets stared up at Alex accusingly, even as he backed away from it, shaking in disbelief at the sudden realization that slammed into his head.

All these bodies—they were from a plane crash!

More specifically, from the Flight 180 plane crash.

A nauseating burst of awareness flooded back into Alex as he remembered.

He was dreaming. This was all a dream, and when he woke up again, he'd be back in the real world, where everything was wrong and the FBI was watching him and his parents were worried about him, and where Tod was dead.

Tod! He'd just seen Tod! He had to find him! Even though this was only a dream, Alex knew that there was so much he wanted to say to him, so much he wanted to ask him.

"Alex?"

Alex spun around at the sound of the familiar voice, his heart almost imploding in his chest. Clear Rivers was standing behind him, rotting body parts piled on either side of her. She flicked up her welding mask and smiled at him.

"Hey, Alex!"

"Clear?" Alex started to smile, amazed to see her here in this terrible place. He took a step towards her and then stopped, his gaze drawn to the sculpture she was making. It was the same as the sculpture of him he'd seen at her house, but instead of being made of scrap metal, this sculpture was made of mangled human body parts.

Alex stared at it in shock and revulsion. The sculpture was roughly humanoid in form, a welded mass of charred human backbones making up the torso of the sculpture, and smaller, random bones protruding from it like thorns. Blood vessels snaked their way up it, mingling with the blackened veins, flash-seared to the white bones, and on top of the sculpture was a real human head.

A very familiar head.

Clear suddenly stepped up behind Alex as he stared at it in shock, so close that he could feel the heat of her body through his clothing.

"Know what this is?" she asked him coyly.

On top of the question mark-shaped sculpture, Alex's severed head opened its bloody eyes and screamed.

Alex screamed back at it, frantically backpedaling and not even looking where he was going, so desperate was he to get away. As he did so, a black cloud of what looked like smoke poured out of the severed head's mouth and flew up into the room, smacking into the ceiling and separating out into dozens of flitting black shapes. An ear-splitting, chattering sound filled the air, and Alex slapped his hands over his ears and turned to run.

A second later, he reached the double doors at the end of the room with a bruising thump and practically fell through them. Once he was on the other side, he ran, as far and as fast as he could, back through the morgue, back through the school, putting everything he had into just running and running and running, until finally he burst out through the front doors of the school, down the steps, and took off across the grass like a shot.

Half crazed with fear, Alex threw a glance over his shoulder. A black cloud was pouring out of the school's windows, boiling up into the air and heading towards him. Alex saw that it was made up of hundreds of thousands of squirming black shadows that writhed and shrieked as they flew through the air.

They were heading right towards him.

Alex knew instinctively that if one of those shadows touched him, he would be dead. The only thing left to do was run.

He redoubled his pace, flying over the grass.

Even in his terror-stricken state, he instantly saw that something was wrong. The lush grass of the school grounds was gone, and in its place was coarse, yellow stubble, as though the grass had gone an entire summer without being watered. The trees had all lost their leaves and become twisted, black shapes that loomed up on either side of him, seeming to reach out for him as he fled past.

Just how long had he been gone, anyway?

Alex increased his speed as he flew towards the area where the memorial was supposed to be taking place, then veered away from it in fear. All the seats were ablaze, melting into two hundred deformed iron sculptures of their own, the hot metal searing black holes in the

dying school lawn. Flame belched furiously from the podium and thick, oily smoke roiled up into the blue sky, turning it black. A tiny burst of lightning crackled in the sky above the smoke cloud, and embryonic thunderclouds began to coalesce, quickly spreading to fill the sky.

Alex ducked with a cry as several black shapes whooshed over his head and struck the Flight 180 memorial, disappearing into it in a puff of black ash. The material covering it instantly decayed into a tatter of matted cloth, revealing the sculpture beneath. Instead of the majestic bronze eagle, there lay a pile of thirty-nine charred bodies, slowly oozing blood onto the yellowed school lawn.

Alex began to run again, in earnest, flying across the grass, desperate to get away. There was no sign of Tod, and Alex realized that he would probably never see him again. Tears sprang unbidden to his eyes, blurring his vision, but he ran still faster. A keening, wailing sound from behind him told him that the black shadows were gaining on him, and Alex felt his willpower begin to drain away as the sound filled his ears, swamping his brain with a drowsy paralysis that told him that life would be so much easier if he just stopped for a moment, lay down, got some rest.

Alex shook himself, gritting his teeth as he ran.

He had to fight it, or he was lost.

A wood loomed ahead. Alex ran towards it, grateful for the cover, and dodged in between the trees, snapping a quick glance behind him. The black shadows were nearly upon him, pouring down out of the sky and forming a spinning black arrow as they angled in toward him. Alex's muscles burned and his breath scorched his throat as he ran down a short slope, heading deeper into the woods.

The shadows were mere seconds behind him, and Alex gave a shout of defiance as he poured every last ounce of his strength into his legs, speeding up even more as he ran headlong downhill, heading for the heart of the woods. The ground beneath his feet was turning marshy, clinging to his feet as he ran, and Alex felt himself starting to slow down. Thick mud splashed beneath his feet as he pelted onwards, and the harder he tried to run, the deeper he sank into the ground.

Alex burst through into a clearing, completely exhausted, and staggered through the mud as fast as he could. Tall trees surrounded him on all sides, blocking out his view. Through the trees he could see a welcome shape—his house!

He was nearly home! If he could just get home, everything would be okay again.

Alex took a few more steps and stumbled as he sank ankle-deep, and then calf-deep into the thick mud. He tried to jerk his foot free and lost his balance, pitching forward into the muck. His arm sank up to the elbow, and Alex frantically pulled himself forward towards the nearest tree, trying to extricate himself from the mud. A wailing sound from behind told Alex that the shadows were nearly upon him. Grabbing hold of the tree, he pulled himself upright, yanking himself free of the clinging mire.

A squawk came from above him, and Alex stared upwards—what now? He grimaced as he saw four dark shapes circling him overhead on wide wings.

Vultures.

Oh, that was just perfect.

Could things get any worse?

Even as the thought passed through Alex's head, he regretted it. An instant later, a whooshing, roaring sound came from behind him, and a flicker of fast approaching movement in the periphery of his vision hot-wired Alex's body into action. He flung himself flat on the ground in the mud, just as one of the shadows zoomed over his head, so close he could hear the rush of air as it passed him. The shadow smacked into the tree beside him, vanishing into the trunk in a cloud of smoke.

Alex peered up at the tree fearfully. He saw that the tree trunk, where the shadow had hit it, was blackened, and that all the color was bleaching out of the area around it, as though the life was being sucked out of it by a giant with an invisible straw. Cracks radiated outwards, bisecting the trunk and spreading up the tree at an alarming rate.

Alex finally shook himself free of the mud, scrambled to his feet and staggered backwards, gawping upwards. An ominous creaking



sound filled the air as the bark around the cracks crumbled away, like plaster drying out in the sun. The tree began to sway back and forth, its leaves falling all around Alex, like rain. There was a loud *crack* as the trunk gave way.

The whole tree started to fall towards Alex.

Overhead, the vultures screeched in triumph.

Adrenaline gave Alex a burst of speed as he pelted as fast as he could away from the tree. He was so close to his house, if he could just reach it, he would be safe.

He reached the front path and sprinted up it. Reaching the front door, he grabbed the handle and yanked on it.

It was stuck.

A shadow fell across Alex as the tree plummeted down towards him, closely followed by the shrieking shadow creatures. Leaves fluttered and fell around him like rain as he kicked the door as hard as he could once, twice, three times.

"Open, damn you!" he yelled.

A fourth kick did the job. The lock gave way in a shower of rotten, wood fragments and Alex half ran, half fell through it, slamming it breathlessly behind him. He danced away from the door and flattened himself against the opposite wall, tensing himself for the crash of the tree falling across the house.

It never came.

Puzzled, Alex waited a few more moments, warily approached the door, step by cautious step, and peered through the keyhole. Outside, the woods were silent. There was no sign of the tree or the freaky shadows. Alex let out his breath in a gasp of relief. He turned, slumped heavily back against the doors and closed his eyes in relief.

Finally, he was safe.

"Alex?"

Alex frowned at the sound of the voice. It was so familiar...

He opened his eyes and gasped.

Christa was standing over him, a vision in blue. She gazed down at him coyly, her face lit up by a glowing smile. Blake stood beside her, beaming down at him and really working the sex appeal.

"Could you trade seats with Blake so that she and I can sit together?" Christa asked.

Alex's face froze.

"She asked Tod, but he says he's got some sorta medical thing."

Alex's eyes flicked back down the aisle to Tod who shook his head frantically "*no*", then drew his hand sharply across his neck and mimed throwing a noose over his own head.

Alex looked back up at Christa, who gave him her best helpless-little-girl look and batted her eyelashes at him. "Please?"

Alex's blood turned to screaming black ice. He was back on the plane again!

This couldn't be happening!

He started up in his seat, wide-eyed and trembling, then shoved his way past the two startled girls, making a violent bolt for the aisle. His eyes flicked frantically right, then left before settling on the familiar shape of Tod.

Tod!

Alex darted down the aisle, pale-faced and shaking. Everyone nearby turned to stare at him, surprised by the sudden commotion. Without a word, Alex vaulted over Tod into the vacant seat beside him. Tod looked up, a little startled at his friend's wild expression.

"Dude. What's up?"

Alex glanced at Tod and started backwards in shock. Tod's face was deathly white, mottled with blue bruises and broken blood vessels. He was wearing bright pink blusher and acid orange foundation, and his lips were tinted with rouge. His throat was a mess of bloody cuts, a red line bisecting his neck. Fresh blood oozed from his mouth, and he wiped at it distractedly as he gazed at Alex, an expression of mild concern on his face.

Alex scrabbled backwards and tried to jump up, to run down the aisle and get the hell off the plane, but he found that for some reason he couldn't move. He was stuck in his seat. He looked down to see that he was wearing a seatbelt, although he had no memory of putting it on. Panicking, he reached down to rip it off, but found there was no buckle. The belt was perfectly smooth, and seemed to be growing out of the seat, trapping him. As Alex scrabbled at it in a

frenzy, more belts shot out of the seat and wrapped themselves around him tightly, binding him to the seat. Alex started kicking and yelling, trying to free himself from the clinging nylon straps.

"Is there a problem, sir?"

Alex looked up, trembling. A male flight attendant stood over him, a concerned look on his face. Alex's mouth fell open in shock. The flight attendant's face was burned and blackened, as though someone had held a blowtorch to his head for a couple of minutes. His skull gleamed through the matted mess of what was left of his hair, and dark blood flowed freely from his missing right cheekbone.

Behind him, a dozen eyes met his as the students in the center aisle stared at him, grateful for the entertainment.

Dude was having some kind of panic attack. What a freak.

The students were all burned and blackened, too.

Alex looked up at the attendant, sweating profusely, and opened his mouth to speak. Instantly, another belt shot out of the seat and clamped over his mouth, jerking his head back and pressing it tightly against the headrest.

*Whumph-klunk!* The main door to the cabin was slammed shut. The air stewards locked down the escape hatch handles and then primly strapped themselves into their seats ready for takeoff.

Alex started yelling, thrashing around in his seat in a vain attempt to free himself.

He *had* to get off the plane!

"Alex! Take it easy!" soothed Tod, blood dripping from his ruptured eye sockets.

Alex ignored him, struggling with his seatbelt. Then all the blood drained from his face as he heard a far worse sound—the noise of the engines starting. Before he could even cry out, the plane lurched, and suddenly they were accelerating down the runway, the g-force pressing everyone back into their seats. The cabin tilted sharply and the plane lifted into the air with a scream of turbines, bumping and rattling as it gained altitude. The lights inside the cabin dimmed as storm clouds amassed outside the windows ominously, the booming sound of thunder filling the air.

There was a sudden burst of breaking glass inside the cabin. Passengers screamed and Alex whipped around to see the cabin's porthole windows begin to blacken before they exploded inwards, one by one. Black, wraithlike shapes flitted in through the broken windows, and Alex realized with a shock that the shadow creatures had found him. They whizzed around the cabin, their gleeful howls frighteningly loud in the confined space, and descended on the passengers like hungry locusts. Each person they touched froze into a rapidly-blackening statue before disintegrating into a pile of hot ash.

Alex cowered away as one smacked into Tod, reducing him to dust that spilled off his seat in a great drift. A babble of voices filled his head as he ducked under his seat, trying to break free of the clinging seatbelts as the wraithlike creatures closed in.

Then, the lights cut out.

Seemingly random strings of numbers swam before Alex's eyes in the darkness, the winds of chance swirling them around in a silver stream in his mind. A massive crack of lightning split the air open by the left wing, illuminating the deaths of the passengers in a blaze of unholy white fire, and Alex saw that everything on the plane was made of millions of tiny numbers, clicking over and over like the wheels of Vegas-style one-armed bandits.

Then the numbers started counting down, and Alex knew that they were all doomed...

"More coffee, sir?"

Alex looked up from the floor as a second flash of lightning revealed the beaming, skeletal face of Mr Bludworth peering down at him, dressed in a flight attendant's uniform. He had a bloodied white apron tied around his waist like a butcher, and held a broken ceiling fan in one charred hand. His eyes were bottomless black pits, stretching to infinity. As Alex shrank back away from him, the mortician leaned forward so he could whisper in Alex's ear.

"Death has a design," he said, then exploded in an eyeball-searing burst of light.

Alex screamed and screamed and screamed.

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Alex awoke with a jump. He lurched into a sitting position, sweating and hyperventilating, and stared wildly around him.

Four walls. A door with a bright rectangle of light shining under it. His mobiles swinging gently in the open window. The ceiling fan whirring above him.

He was back in his room and everything was normal.

Alex drew in his breath, expanding his lungs, and blew it out again.

He was alive.

Thank Christ for that.

Swallowing, he ran a shaking hand through his soaked hair, then stopped, puzzled. Slowly, he opened his hand.

The word "Tod" stared back at him.

Alex jumped backwards and convulsively threw the magazine fragment on the floor. He stared down at it, his heart thundering in his chest.

Then he clenched his teeth and reached out for the phone. Right now, coffee sounded like a really, really good idea, because there was no way in hell he was going back to sleep tonight.

# SIX

The sidewalk café was bustling with activity as Alex and Clear sat down outside the *Coffee Beanery* early the next morning. It was a gray, overcast day, and a recent rainfall had slicked the streets with water. Cars swished past noisily, spraying passing pedestrians with water, and there was a certain tension in the air, filled with the promise of more rain to come. The two teens had been walking and talking for over four hours, and were still no closer to reaching an answer that would help them make sense of the last month or so. Clear hadn't slept much last night either, and the coffee was helping perk her up a little.

Alex pulled his rainproof jacket a little closer around himself as he sipped on his steaming coffee, rattling his metal chair a little closer to the table. His bad dream still hung over him like a shroud, and he was on the edge of his seat with a confusing mix of stress and excitement.

"That mortician said that Death has a design, right?"

Clear nodded unhappily.

"So, even before he said that, I had been seeing patterns." Alex paused, looking around with fresh eyes.

Everything seemed *connected*, somehow. The cars on the street, the shoppers flooding towards the nearby mall, even the seagulls wheeling in the sky overhead. They were all part of an overall pattern that when seen as a whole, started to make sense in the seeming randomness of the world. The circuits of life clattered busily all around him, like individual tiles on a flight information board, each unit of life a letter that, from a distance, spelled out word, then a sentence, then a complete message.

Although what that message could possibly be, Alex didn't have a clue.

Alex's tiredness faded away as the caffeine flooded his system, and everything seemed to suddenly make sense. The whole world was like a pattern, and all he had to do was figure it out, and then he would be safe. It was so obvious that he wondered why he had never

noticed it before. Now all he had to do was explain it all to Clear, and the two of them would take on the world together.

"How many from our group died on Flight 180?" he asked her, warming to his topic.

"Thirty-nine."

"Right. And how many of us were supposed to be on the plane?"

"Forty-six."

Alex sat forward, excitement sparkling in his eyes. "And what was the gate number?"

"I don't remember."

"Forty-six," said Alex in an ominous tone of voice.

Clear looked at him, skeptical, yet she was creeped out nonetheless.

Alex rubbed his hands together to warm them. "Remember the departure time?"

"Like... nine twenty-five?"

"Do you know when I was born?"

Clear sighed and shook her head, growing impatient.

"September twenty-fifth."

"Wait." Clear put down her coffee cup. "I thought you meant the time of your birth. Not the month and day. That's a reach."

"My birthdate is the same as the time I was meant to die? That's a reach?"

Clear sat back in her seat, pulling the long sleeves of her white sweater down to cover her chilly hands. This was all starting to sound a little whacko to her.

"You know what? You're sounding like those people who are like, you know, 'Oswald shot Kennedy from a warehouse and hid in a theater and Booth shot Lincoln in a theater and hid in a warehouse.'" She shook her head apologetically. "I'm not buying this."

"But I'm talking 'bout omens!" Alex leaned forward and gazed into Clear's eyes, his face full of excitement. "How do we know that by just sitting here, sipping this coffee, or breathing the air, or even just crossing the intersection, that we haven't just started in motion the events that will someday lead to our deaths, forty years from now... Ten years from now... Tomorrow?"

Clear shivered, nervously rubbing her cold hands together. She didn't like the sound of all this. It all sounded too fatalistic, too doom-and-gloom for her to get her head around it so early in the morning. She looked at Alex sitting across from her. He sounded so certain when he talked like this, as if he really knew what he was going on about. And he had saved her life, so that gave him some credibility.

She wanted so badly to believe him.

But what if this was all a crock of shit? What if his "vision" had just been a coincidence or a bad dream? It was entirely possible. How many people had bad dreams about flying when they were due to get on a plane?

So what did she know for certain? One thing she knew for sure was how she had felt. Sitting there, on that jet, her fear had been so real. Every time she thought about it she freaked out.

Sitting here, in the safety of the sidewalk café, watching Alex rant on, she felt a tiny sliver of doubt creep into her mind about his "premonition," and about Tod's death, too. Grief did funny things to people; it made them do stupid things, act out of character. She of all people knew that.

Maybe there was no "plan?" What if this *was* all in their heads?

Meanwhile, Alex had answered his own question.

"We don't know... unless we're willing to open ourselves up to the signs that are all around us." Alex slapped a hand on the table and pushed a torn piece of paper across to Clear.

She picked it up and studied it warily. "I don't understand." She lowered her voice, looking at Alex intently. There was something she had to know before she made up her mind about all this. "Did you see Tod die? Did it happen again, like on the plane?"

Alex shook his head. "No. It didn't."

Clear sat back in her chair, folding her arms, her mouth set in a hard line of disappointment. One crock of shit, coming right up.

"But it might as well have!" protested Alex, seeing her expression. He picked up the piece of torn paper and waved it at her. "This is a *message* from something, Clear, or *someone*, hinting at a design."



Clear snorted, unwilling to believe him. "Total bullshit. You can find death omens anywhere you want to."

She carried on talking, but Alex was no longer listening, his attention caught by the fast moving reflection of a Greyhound bus in the *Coffee Beanery* window. He watched it trundle towards him before idly turning his head to watch it pass him in the street.

There was nothing there.

On the table, his empty coffee cup rattled as if in a breeze, although the air was still. Alex frowned, craning his neck around, but the street was empty in both directions.

Opposite him, Clear picked up her half-empty cup and waggled it at Alex to get his attention.

"Coffee. Starts with a 'C' and ends with an 'E.' So does the word 'choke! So, what, am I gonna choke to death?" She sat back in her chair and shook her head, eyeing Alex dubiously. "We'll go nuts if we start with this shit."

Alex stared at her, his mind still on the ghostly bus. Was he going crazy... or was this another sign? Should he stay away from roads from now on; was that it? Although he knew it was ridiculous, something inside him had already started a countdown.

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One street away, Billy Hitchcock whistled cheerfully, pumping the pedals of his mud-spattered mountain bike as he made his way home along the main road from the store. A brown paper bag of groceries wobbled precariously on his handlebars, and he munched on a cheese and pepperoni sandwich, fresh from the bakery. It wasn't bad. It could use a little more mayo, but hey, it was good enough.

Billy found that food always made things better.

He made a left turn, nodding amiably at the motorist in the blue sedan who stopped to let him cross the road, his cheeks stuffed like a hamster. As he sped over the pedestrian crossing, Billy realized that he was actually feeling happy. It was a bright day, the sun had finally come out from behind the clouds, and his mom would be so pleased with him when she saw that he had picked up the groceries for her.

He had been running errands all morning, and this was the last of them. Then it would be straight home for him, hopefully some lunch, then some basketball practice to round off the weekend. Perfect.

Billy sighed, enjoying the feeling of the air rushing over his face. It had been a crappy month, but he'd got through it. He couldn't let himself get too hung up on what had happened.

Life went on, and Billy was determined to make the most of it.

All that death stuff was behind him now.

Two blocks away, Carter revved the engine of his vintage, cherry and black muscle car, heading west on Main at high speed. Beside him, Terry rode shotgun, idly filing her nails as the car sped through the wet streets. Loud music thumped from the car's super-woofer speaker system, making the windows rattle and passing shoppers glare. Carter didn't care. He loved the attention. It didn't matter how people were looking at him; all that mattered was that they were looking.

He glanced out the window as they crossed the intersection, and his eyes narrowed dangerously as he caught sight of a familiar face sitting outside a coffee shop.

Browning. That freak. What was he doing out in public? And to make things worse, that skanky little mouse—what was her name?—from the plane, was sitting opposite him, sipping her coffee and staring at Alex intently, as though the secrets of the universe were written on his scrawny, anemic face.

Carter's nostrils flared in contempt. What—were the two of them screwing now? They certainly seemed pretty into each other. Typical Browning, taking advantage of some freaky coincidence to score chicks.

Loser.

Carter scowled, his anger rising as he slowed the car, staring at the guy he felt was responsible for all his problems. He hadn't slept properly since the crash. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't screw. He had too much on his mind, and for Carter, this was an unnatural state of affairs.

His life was *over*, man.

And it was all Browning's fault.

Carter revved the engine again, visualizing a red crosshair appearing over Alex's head. He hadn't asked for the little dickweed to save his life. He couldn't stand the feeling that he *owed* him something. Every time he looked at him, he saw it in his eyes. *That look*. The look that said, "If it weren't for me, you'd be dead."

Carter couldn't stand that look. *He* was the one that was in control of his life, not some trumped-up little squirt from French class.

Beside him, Terry followed his gaze and her smile faded away. She glanced up anxiously at her boyfriend as he slowed his car, tapping his fingers moodily on the wheel.

Oh no, not again.

Back at the café, Alex glared angrily at Clear, mad at her for not believing him. He dropped his voice, conscious of the crowded street around him.

"Look, the mortician said that Death has a design. What if you, me, Tod, Carter, Terry, Billy, Ms Lewton—we all messed up that design for whatever reason? I saw Death's plan, and I cheated it." Alex paused, gathering his thoughts, and then leaned forward, his voice compelling. "What if it *was* our time? What if we weren't *meant* to get off that plane? What if it still *is* our time?"

Clear felt a shiver go through her, but she said nothing.

"If it is, then it's not finished. And we *will* die. Now. Not later. Unless we find the patterns and cheat it again."

Alex sat back in his chair and gazed at Clear expectantly. He had laid all his cards down on the table. Now, it was up to her.

Nearby, the engine of Carter's muscle car rumbled as he drew up to the intersection. As Carter approached the red light, his mouth tightened. There was no way he was going to let Browning go skipping off into the sunset with his little groupie. He shouldn't be allowed to screw with other people's lives and get away with it.

Someone should teach him a lesson.

At the café, Clear set her empty coffee cup back down on the table with a *thump*, and gave Alex a long, hard look. "After hearing you, I do believe..."

Alex started to smile, feeling a flush of relief wash through him.

"...that Tod killed himself," finished Clear carefully. She looked at Alex and sighed at the look of hurt that flashed across his face. There. She'd said it. She really wanted to believe him, but if his 'premonition' had just been an isolated incident, then it had to be a coincidence. Alex was just tormenting himself with the load of bullshit spinning around his head that was influenced by what some creepy psycho mortician had said. Anyone who spent that much time around the dead had to have at least one screw loose, right?

It was all for the best that she tell him what she really thought. She just hoped that Alex could see that.

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At the red light, Carter was still seething. As he watched Clear and Alex in the mirror, deep in conversation, his rage suddenly boiled over. Without bothering to check for vehicles, he cranked the wheel hard to the left to make a tight U-turn in the middle of the road. His tires squealed on the asphalt, and Terry gave a little shriek as she was thrown against the side of the car by the sudden acceleration.

Carter ignored her, his furious gaze fixed on Alex.

Pedaling his bike towards the *Coffee Beanery*, Billy Hitchcock gave a yelp of alarm as a black car suddenly cut in front of him at high speed. He saw the side of the car barreling towards him and frantically twisted his handlebars, trying to avoid a collision with the two tons of black steel zooming towards his face. White-knuckling the grips, he steered around the side of the car and zipped into the opposite lane, barely avoiding a collision with Carter's ostentatious ride.

Jeez! Close one! Now who the hell was that idi—

A horn honked, frighteningly close. A stab of fear shot through Billy, and he instinctively threw up his hands in alarm as an oncoming car steered to the right to avoid him. The next thing he knew he was flying over the handlebars as the bike flipped out from underneath him, spilling him and his groceries into the middle of the road. Billy hit the road hard, and he felt a flash of pain through his hands and knees. He tumbled over and over in a storm of flying meat

products and detergent bottles, one thought repeating over and over in his head.

Please don't let me die... Please don't let me die...

*Screeeeeeeeccchhh!*

*Clang!*

The rear end of the oncoming car hit his bike as it spun around, trying to avoid him, and sent it spinning up into the air. It came down again with a *clang* and Billy curled up into a fetal ball in the middle of the road, whimpering in fright as tires screeched and horns honked all around him. Just before he closed his eyes, he saw a black tire whiz past inches from his head, pulverizing the remains of his sandwich and splattering it all over the road.

Oh, crap!

The oncoming car braked hard and finally slowed to a halt less than a foot away from where Billy lay. Behind it, two other cars whipped around in a circle as their drivers braked hard, avoiding a pile-up by a few precious feet. Angry voices filled the air as drivers yelled obscenities at Carter's rapidly retreating car.

Unaware of the devastation he had just caused behind him, Carter accelerated hard back down the road and slammed on the brakes outside the Coffee Beanery, his car stereo blaring. Pulling up at the curb, he killed the engine and got out of the car, then strutted toward the tables outside the café, seething with righteous indignation.

Terry flung open her door and leaned out. "Hey, baby, c'mon. Not now!" she shouted in exasperation.

Carter ignored her. He strode up to Alex, watching with satisfaction as the little twerp's face paled in dismay. Ha! Browning knew what was coming to him, and he was too wimpy to even run away.

Gotcha.

Back at the red light, two passers-by helped Billy to his feet and pulled his mangled bicycle off of the road. Billy squinted after the driver who had just nearly killed him.

"Hey!" he yelled up the road.

Carter ignored him. He stopped in front of Alex, looking him up and down. Just then, a familiar figure walked out of the coffee shop

with a huge cup in her hand, and stopped dead at the sight of them all.

Ms Lewton.

The pretty teacher saw Alex and her face turned gray.

Carter smirked. "Well, looks like we have a bit of a reunion here."

"Let it go." Terry jumped out of the car behind Carter and stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at her boyfriend

Carter's posture straightened and he marched right up to Ms Lewton, putting his thoughts of beating Alex into a bloody pulp on his mental backburner. It might be more interesting to humiliate him in a different way.

"So... when are you moving?" he asked Ms Lewton, the cold malice in his voice at odds with the simpering "teacher's pet" expression on his face.

Ms Lewton averted her eyes, not wanting to look at any of them. Those darn Flight 180 students gave her the creeps. Every time she looked at one of them she saw Larry Murnau's face staring right back at her.

"A couple weeks," she replied eventually, trying to keep her voice steady.

"That's too bad," said Carter, looking her up and down appreciatively. He stepped in closer, blocking her path, and dropped his voice, flicking the tip of his tongue across his lips. "You know... you were my favorite teacher..."

Ms Lewton gave a weak smile and tried to move away from him, seeing his eyes glint in amusement as she did so. The reek of his industrial strength cologne almost made her gag.

Damn you, Carter Horton.

Alex rose to his feet excitedly, glad he had a chance to get everyone together. They all needed to know about the "pattern" thing right away. He may have lost Clear on this one, but he had evidence, and if they valued their lives, they had to believe him.

"Look, there's something that I need to tell you guys," he announced, walking over to Ms Lewton, who cringed away from him. "It could affect your whole life. Now, I know you're probably not going to believe me, but—"

"Alex!" Clear snapped. She couldn't believe he was going to embarrass himself like this in front of everybody. If Ms Lewton got wind of the fact that he was still going on about his "premonition", he would be back in that school psychiatrist's office so quick it would make his head spin.

Meanwhile, Billy Hitchcock was slowly nearing the café. He limped around Carter's parked car and homed in on the jock, furious as he recognized his classmate.

"Carter, you dick!" he shouted.

Alex waved him over quickly. "Listen to me. We may all be in danger..."

Carter was still eyeing Ms Lewton. "You've lived here your whole life?" he asked leadingly, continuing on his theme.

"Yes, but..."

Perfect. Carter swung around to Alex, his black eyes blazing. "And now she's gotta move... all because of Browning!" he shouted in Alex's face, silencing him midsentence.

"Enough! *Both* of you!" yelled Terry.

Shocked, they both turned toward her.

Terry stepped back, tears glinting in her hazel eyes. She wavered under their combined attention, but held firm, her bottom lip quivering.

"They died, and we lived! Get over it!" Her furious gaze flicked between the two scowling boys. "I won't let that plane crash be the most important thing in my life. God!"

She thumped Carter hard on the arm, furious at him, and then angrily wiped her eyes. Still glaring at Carter, she stepped backwards off the curb towards the car.

"I'm moving on, Carter!" she yelled. "And if you're gonna waste your life beating the shit out of Alex every time you see him, then you can drop fucking dead!"

***BLAM!***

Terry suddenly exploded in a spray of blood as a bus came out of nowhere and smacked into her at high speed.

Alex, Clear, Carter and Ms Lewton were spattered with blood before they could even recoil. Limbs and internal organs flew

through the air, raining down on the sidewalk in an avalanche of offal. Tires screeched as the bus juddered to a halt further down the road, stopping with a *hiss*.

There was a terrible, deathly silence.

Ms Lewton looked down at the blood dripping from her hands and began to wail.



# SEVEN

Alex sat, slumped in his father's chair in the living room, in front of the flickering TV set. Two Alka-Seltzers fizzed in an untouched glass of water by his side. The noise roused him from his dazed stupor, and he stared at them dully before taking a few sips from the glass. He gave a small burp and winced at the sour taste it left in his mouth. What with all the blood and gore he'd seen in the last twenty-four hours, his stomach would never forgive him. It would be months before he would be able to even look at a slice of pizza again.

The phone rang in its cradle at his side, but Alex ignored it, his tired gaze fixed on the TV set. They'd been advertising this new bulletin about Flight 180 on the News Channel for about two hours now, as though taunting him with it, making him sit through hours of crap just to see this one feature.

He hoped it'd be worth it, or he'd be putting his foot through the set.

Part of him realized that he was becoming obsessed. Another part of him really didn't care. He watched tiredly as a new item about a recalled line of kitchen stoves came on, and briefly considered switching to another channel. He decided he didn't care enough to even move.

Leaky gas stoves—as if that was news.

He snorted derisively, his mind wandering.

*They'd needed a shovel to put her in the body bag.*

Alex hiccupped again and then pulled a face.

Just stop thinking about it!

The tall, earnest figure of Alex's father entered the room silently behind him and he leaned on the doorframe, watching his son in concern. The phone at Alex's side was still ringing, but the boy didn't seem to even register the sound. He had been sitting in front of that blasted TV all afternoon, ever since they got back from the police station. Alex had been through some real bad stuff this past month, but today had really shaken him.

Mr Browning heaved a small, sorrowful sigh. That poor girl... and so soon after Tod, too. Alex had hardly said a word to them since they'd got back, and he didn't blame him.

When Alex made no move to answer the phone, Mr Browning swooped forward and picked it up, unable to bear the ringing anymore.

"Hello?"

At the other end of the line, Clear Rivers picked up her own glass of foaming Alka Seltzer and took a quick sip. Alex wasn't the only one who'd thrown up.

"Hi... Is Alex there?" she asked, smoothing down her nightgown. She heard the note of naive hope in her own voice, and cursed herself for it. Pathetic.

"Just a minute, Clear." Mr Browning put his hand over the receiver and motioned to Alex. "It's Clear. Again. You wanna talk to her?"

Alex ignored him, his red-rimmed eyes glued to the TV.

Sighing, Mr Browning uncovered the phone. "Clear? He's... in the shower. Can I get him to call you back?"

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A hot knife of disappointment twisted inside Clear. "Sure. Goodbye," she muttered, not even bothering to hide the bitterness in her voice. As the line went dead, she sat down on her bed and hurled the phone down onto the pillow beside her.

So, what, she was a leper now?

Sighing, she ran a hand through her wet hair, eyeing the creased newspaper clipping of Alex and herself at the memorial service which was pinned above the cracked, steamed-up mirror in her bedroom.

The strangely innocent expression on his face taunted her, and after a moment, she ripped the clipping down and flung it onto her dresser, disgusted with herself. She didn't know why she had even kept it.

Alex didn't want to talk to her?

Clear flopped down on her bed and turned out the light.

Fine. Screw him.

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On the other side of town, in the funeral home, Mr Bludworth stared down at the mangled remains of Terry Chaney lying on the porcelain slab, and his lips tightened in regret.

Another young one gone. The heavens were indeed unkind.

He adjusted the angled lamp, shining a beam of clinical white light down onto the broken body of the teen. Whoever had done Terry's autopsy had made a determined attempt at piecing her shattered body back together, but the crude stitching along her neck and upper torso put Mr Bludworth more in mind of some Frankenstein's creation than of a young girl in her prime.

This one should really be closed-casket, he thought.

Tilting his head, he gazed down at her thoughtfully, noting the massive bruising that marred ninety percent of her exposed flesh, and the deformities to her lower right abdomen and pelvis that not even the best stitching and stuffing could repair. The damage done to her torso was too acute and widespread to be made aesthetically pleasing, but the bus that had ended her young life so violently had miraculously spared her face.

It was just the rest of her that was totally, hideously ruined.

Mr Bludworth's fingers closed on the cold metal of his surgical scalpel, and he stepped up to the slab and leaned over Terry's body, mopping some of the congealed blood away from her throat with a sterile wipe. She should've been cleaned up a little better after the big stitch-job; whoever worked on her obviously wasn't being paid enough.

Mr Bludworth *tsked* under his breath. What was the world coming to when even the dead weren't taken care of?

His emotionless eyes scanned Terry's blue-white skin, looking for a place to begin his work. Her shoulder had been smashed and the bone had broken through the skin, detaching from its ball-and-socket joint, but it had been shoved back with little regard for its proper place, and was now visible as a swollen lump beneath the mottled skin of her shoulder. Sloppy work all round.

Pulling on a pair of disposable blue surgeon's gloves, Mr Bludworth repelled the bone with an effort and locked it back into place, then lifted his scalpel and made a deft, three-inch incision in the side of Terry's throat, down near her shattered collarbone. Dark, almost black blood welled in the wound, but did not run out, as the fluid in her arteries had started to congeal. Mr Bludworth prodded at the incision with a gloved finger, opening it up further to expose the two, big meaty muscles located there. Delicately, he picked up a stainless steel separator and used it to push aside the muscles, exposing the carotid artery and the jugular vein that led to and from the heart.

Setting the scalpel down on a stainless steel tray, Mr Bludworth tilted his head and peered down at Terry's exposed innards. It never failed to amaze him how incredibly clever and complex the human body was. Every part of it was so exquisitely designed to do its job that often he found himself wondering if it hadn't been designed by some higher power.

He knew that to be a falsehood, of course, but sometimes he couldn't help but take his hat off to the miracle of evolution that was made possible by the mechanism of natural selection that had enabled this hypercomplex, biological machine to come into being. It was far from finished, he knew that much, but in the meantime, even the most scientifically and technologically advanced creations of man couldn't match it, which, considering his background, he found quite awe inspiring.

No computer could be programmed to think like it—a million dollars of ultrasophisticated hardware was no match for the couple of pounds of organic soufflé that was the human brain. No robotic system could act like it; even the most advanced robots had trouble with simple things like maintaining balance or walking up stairs.

No, the human body was unique, and the end product of a lifetime of research and toil by the greatest men of science and engineering could be easily outmatched by a pregnant teenager giving birth to her squalling offspring in her basement.

Mr Bludworth clamped off Terry's few leaking blood vessels by her neck muscles and reached behind him to adjust his big, clam-shaped

chrome lamp, swinging it closer so the exposed flesh and ligaments glistened.

Still, he thought, the human body had one fatal flaw—it had only one user. The smallest unrepaired leak, the tiniest glitch in its inner workings, and it was fit only for worm food.

And being hit by a speeding bus would do the same job, too.

Carefully, Mr Bludworth picked up a smaller instrument and made an incision in Terry's carotid artery. Clotted blood squelched out, and he quickly pushed the thick needle of the cannula down the artery, pointing it towards the heart. With his other hand, he turned the pump on the large jar of pale embalming fluid, and watched with satisfaction as it flowed down the thick, clear tube into the young girl's body.

Fixing the tube in place with another shining clamp, Mr Bludworth inserted a suction pump into Terry's jugular vein and switched it on, and then stripped off his surgeon's gloves and tossed them into a waste receptacle on a nearby bench. The vascular flush would take anything from one to three hours to run through the girl's cardiovascular system, as it replaced her blood with the thick, syrupy embalming fluid. It would stop the decay in her for a time, as the fluid worked its way deep into her tissues, flowing through the myriad of blood vessels and seeping through her capillaries until it completely suffused her flesh. It was necessary, and as anyone who had been near a body that hadn't been embalmed for any length of time could testify, it was well worth the time and expense.

Still, it wasn't a pretty process, and Mr Bludworth was always glad when it was over and he could get started on his favorite bit of the job...

The mortician hooked his thumbs into his suspenders and regarded Terry's body with a look of mild satisfaction. Ten more minutes and his work with her would be done. He was just one of the many people who smoothed the passage of each person from still-warm corpse to freshly buried carcass, and his job was just as vital as that of the autopsy men or the hospital staff. It was a tedious undertaking, but who was to say that he couldn't take pride in his work?

Mr Bludworth turned and scanned the workbench behind him. It was completely swamped by a big pile of tiny pots of colored dyes and oil paint in a dizzying array of colors and textures. On the shelf behind it was a selection of fine horsehair brushes, and a teetering stack of cleaning towels and sponges for applying greasepaint. If he was Death's artist, these were the real tools of his trade.

Moving the electric bone cutter to its proper place on a neighboring bench, Mr Bludworth selected a handful of paints and turned back to Terry's body. Pulling a yearbook photograph out of his pocket, he readjusted the hinged lamp and set to work on Terry's bruised and battered face, covering up the blemishes with greasepaint. From time to time he paused to squint down at her yearbook photo for reference.

After a few minutes, there was a discreet *clunk* from the main door. Mr Bludworth paused in his work, and without looking up, said, "Ah, Mr Weine. Glad you could stop by."

"That's *Agent* Weine," said the newcomer, then paused, scowling. "How'd you know my name?"

Mr Bludworth straightened, although he still didn't turn around. "It's written on your badge," he said mildly. He selected a new pot of cherry-red paint from the worktop and unscrewed the cap. Peering into it, he made a face, and then began stirring it with the end of a cotton bud.

"Yes, well..." said Agent Weine, patting his jacket. He removed his glasses and polished them on his sleeve, worriedly glancing at the uncovered corpse on the embalming table. "Have you got a minute?" he asked, *sotto voce*.

"I have many," said Mr Bludworth. He pointed a paint-covered finger at the body on the table. "Unlike..."

"Right," said Agent Weine. "I won't keep you." He edged further into the room and leaned back uncomfortably on a tray of instruments, being careful not to touch anything. He cleared his throat once or twice and then motioned to Terry's corpse. "Thing is, we need to know..." he said.

Mr Bludworth raised an eyebrow.

"About, you know. Alex."

"What about Alex?" asked Mr Bludworth loudly, and then frowned when Agent Weine shushed him.

"He came here the other night before, you know, this happened. We followed him, and I just wanted to find out... what he was doing in here." Agent Weine pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his sweating brow. He looked even paler than usual, and Mr Bludworth noticed that he was completely avoiding the body on the table.

So, he was one of those.

"Alex came to pay his last respects to the deceased," Mr Bludworth said.

"Indeed. So..." Agent Weine's eyes darted around the room as though looking for hidden clues. "He didn't say—or do—anything unusual? Anything... incriminating?"

"His friend stole one of my brushes, but that is to be overlooked. This is, after all, a trying time, and teens are wont to be foolish when under undue pressure." Mr Bludworth put the paint pot down on the bench and finally turned around. "Beyond that, no. Alex is not the one you're looking for."

"He's not?" Agent Weine perked up. "And I suppose you know who is?"

Mr Bludworth gave a grim half-smile. "If you want to catch the killer, you have to be prepared to be caught by the killer. A fly that dies can spoil the perfumer's ointment, and a single slip can ruin much that is good." Mr Bludworth eyed Terry's body with a look of genuine regret.

"What is that some kind of riddle?" Agent Weine sniffed. "I don't have time for riddles."

"Time is an illusion, Wesley," said Mr Bludworth, picking up his brush. "Lunchtime doubly so." He snorted in amusement and then bent over Terry's body again, applying a fine dust of translucent powder over the top of the greasepaint, to give her skin a more natural finish.

Nearly done.

Agent Weine frowned at the mention of his first name, but wisely decided to let it go. This guy was giving him the willies, and he had a definite impression that the guy was trying to mess with his head.

But let him try all he liked. He was a highly trained FBI professional after all, and not to be trifled with. The guy wanted to play House of Horrors? Fine. But he was in for a tough audience tonight.

"Tell you what," he said evenly, reaching into his jacket. "Here's my card. Alex comes in here again, you call me, alright?"

Mr Bludworth solemnly inclined his head, although it wasn't clear whether he was agreeing, or just squinting in the light. Agent Weine drew out a card, and after a moment's hesitation laid it down on the silver tray beside the racks of surgical instruments. His eyes lingered on the tray before he gingerly picked up one of the larger instruments; a wicked-looking contraption, something like a cross between a hedge cutter and a bread knife.

"What does this one do?" he asked gamely, trying to lift the mood a little.

"The Stryker saw? Oh, that's for cutting through the skull cap to remove the brain," said Mr Bludworth, pleasantly.

Agent Weine dropped the saw with a clatter.

"Don't often use it, but you never know when something like that's gonna come in handy," said Mr Bludworth.

He gave a wicked grin at Agent Weine's horrified expression and wiped his paint-covered hands on his apron, staining it red. Then he cocked his head, as though listening to far-off music. He gave a small smile before taking something off a nearby shelf and casually pointing it at Agent Weine.

There was a flash, and Agent Weine stumbled backwards, screwing up his eyes.

"Ow! What was that? Did you just take my picture?" he cried accusingly.

Mr Bludworth pulled the Polaroid out of the camera and waved it in the air to help it dry. He peered at the emerging image critically and then grunted in satisfaction.

"What'd you do that for?" Agent Weine was beside himself.

"Reference," replied Mr Bludworth, pinning the picture to a shelf.

Agent Weine stared down at the body of Terry, surrounded by little pots of paint, and noticed the yearbook photo pinned up beside her face.



He paled.

"Don't let me detain you," Mr Bludworth called after Agent Weine as he took off like a shot out of the room. The funeral home door *banged* behind him, settling with a *thunk* and a *hiss* of self-sealing vents.

Then all was still again.

Smiling to himself, Mr Bludworth popped the Polaroid camera back up onto the shelf and turned back to Terry's body. Carefully, he adjusted the bubbling cannula in her throat, as though to make her more comfortable, and then gently brushed the blood-spattered blonde hair out of her face and reached once again for his paintbrush.

He had much work to do.

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On the far edge of the suburbs, a light shone brightly from Clear's bedroom window. Inside, Clear sat on her bed, looking longingly down at her pillow. She was exhausted, but was too pissed at Alex to sleep. If she lay down now, she'd be staring at the ceiling till morning... She just knew it.

Only one thing she could do.

Getting up tiredly, Clear crossed to the door and clicked out the bedroom light. She then pottered across the landing and down the stairs, carefully making her way in the blue half-light. The back door was unlocked, which meant that her mother wasn't yet home.

Fine. Whatever.

Clear was used to her mother's frequent midnight sojourns, and only wished that she'd remember to lock the door behind her. Not that she had anything worth stealing in her house, but still, it never hurt to be cautious. Last thing she needed right now was to come home and find that she'd been burgled.

Autumn leaves crinkled under her bare feet as she entered the garage, fumbling for the light switch with her outstretched palm. The fluorescent strip light came on with a blink and a *buzz*, and Clear

edged her way around the mid-eighties, stick shift Corolla parked in the middle of the garage and headed towards her cluttered art bench.

For a long moment, she stood looking around her at the jumbled, rusting artwork that filled every nook and cranny of the garage. She'd been collecting scrap metal for her sculptures since she was little, and most of this stuff had been here for years. Her obsession had started when her father had worked temporarily at a nearby scrapyard, in order to save up some money to pay for the rent on their cabin in the woods. She used to come and keep him company on weekends, spending hours combing through the lot, much to the amusement of her father.

The never-ending drifts of scrap metal had fascinated her—the scrapyard contained everything from old car parts, broken-down kitchen appliances, bits of industrial machinery, junked computers, and everything in between. Her father had let her help him separate out all the salvageable bits from the junk in order to resell them, and she quickly became a pro at identifying all the different types of metal. She could identify expensive iron, and cheap aluminum, she could differentiate between stainless steel and plain electroplated tin, and so on.

Clear would go home each night coated up to the elbows in engine oil, her pockets stuffed full of cogwheels and circuit boards; metallic treasures rescued from certain oblivion. She started making little trinkets out of bendy wire for her mother; crude fashion jewelry stuck together with tape and superglue. Her mother had hardly been appreciative, but no matter, it had sparked something in the young Clear.

By the time she was fifteen, she had saved up enough money to buy her first soldering iron, working her way up the scale of metal-working machinery until finally, last year, she had been able to afford the ultimate in home decoration—her own oxy-acetylene torch. Finally, she could make full-sized sculptures out of any kind of metal she desired, and not have to worry about them falling apart after a couple of weeks. She was in heaven.

She loved the feeling of making something out of nothing, of turning meaningless, random scrap into something that had

meaning for her: a work of art that had life, purpose, and a soul.

Clear approached the torch now, running a hand over it lovingly as she slipped her welding goggles on, carefully tying back her still-damp hair so that it wouldn't get in the way. The gloves went on next—thick brown leather, smelling slightly of oil and turpentine from her brushes. She took the gun off its hook and turned the dial to light the gas, watching as blue-hot flame gushed out of the nozzle. She gazed thoughtfully at the racks full of scrap metal before her, and then selected a stout length of drainpipe and fixed it into the clamp on the bench in front of her with a couple of deft turns of the jointed handle.

She turned the torch up to full power and blasted the end of the pipe for a couple of moments, watching the metal turn a glowing yellow as it softened up. A drop of molten metal plopped downwards and Clear took a quick step backwards as it splashed onto the concrete floor of the garage, wondering vaguely where she had left her shoes. Doing welding barefoot was not normally a good idea, but right now, she didn't much care.

Stars shone through the open garage door as Clear carefully welded the drainpipe to the backbone of her sculpture of Alex, reinforcing the spine to give it more stability. Part of her wondered why she was still working on this piece. After all, Alex probably hated her now. She didn't blame him.

She hadn't believed him.

But then, why should she? Did he have any idea how crazy he had sounded, going on about fate and patterns and numbers like that?

Clear shook her head, trying to get the image of Alex out of her mind. In fact, there were a lot of things she wanted to get out of her head, and Alex was by far the least unpleasant of them. Still, it distressed her far more than she cared to admit that she had lost his trust. He had come to her in confidence, and she had let him down. She had been looking at him when Terry Chaney had died, and the expression on his face on seeing Terry's death still haunted her. He had blamed himself for her death, even though it had been an accident.

So that meant—what exactly?

Could it possibly all be true? Clear's brow furrowed as she guided her torch carefully along the seams of her sculpture, watching the metal shimmer and run into satisfyingly big globules of steel as the blue-hot flame hissed over it. She wished she knew. In a way, it would make things much easier if Alex was right.

Clear shook herself. Whether it was true or not was no longer any of her business. Alex would probably never talk to her again, and it would be her own fault for being so suspicious of him. She was the one person he had trusted, and she had thrown that trust right back in his face. She had believed him when he had warned everyone to get off the plane, and her belief in him had quite literally saved her life. Why should this be any different? Her suspicion of him was like saying that his premonition about the plane exploding had just been a lucky guess.

In a way, he was perfectly justified in being mad at her.

Then again, she was mad at him, too.

Clear turned her oxy-acetylene torch up a little and reached out for a big pair of insulated tongs. Wielding them with difficulty through her thick gloves, she used them to pick up a computer circuit board from her box of scrap metal. She examined it carefully before tossing it back onto the shelf next to a pair of toy false teeth. She then reached into the cardboard box at her feet and snared one end of a strand of razor wire. Lifting it carefully, she held it in place on the back of the sculpture's head, and melted it into place with a few bursts of flame from her gun.

There. Razor wire hair.

See how he liked that.

Sighing, Clear put her tongs down and flicked off the gas. She figured she was going to do more harm than good if she carried on working tonight. Still, it was better than sleeping. It was kind of like metal therapy, although if her art teacher ever got a look at her work, he would most likely pin big red notes all over it which read, "See Me."

Clear gazed thoughtfully up at her Alex-sculpture, then reached up with her gloved hand and bopped it playfully on the nose, sending the whole sculpture rocking madly back and forth on its spring.

When the sculpture settled, the false teeth on the shelf were visible through the glass of Alex's head, coincidentally lining up with its mouth and making it look like the sculpture was grinning.

The effect was so comical that Clear smiled, despite herself.

Sometimes, you had to laugh, or else you'd go crazy.

Clear leaned back on the scarred, pitted bench and regarded the sculpture steadily. Thinking about it now, down here in the sanctuary of her garage, it seemed to her that the only pattern Alex had deciphered was the pattern of chaos, rather than of fate itself. When you thought about the whole infinity of creation, and the sheer number of events that went on in the world, it was hardly surprising that every once in a while, events would line up and something like this would happen. It was like randomly shuffling and dealing a pack of cards an infinite number of times—eventually, sooner or later, every card would come out in order: King, Queen, Jack, Ten, and so on.

The chances of that actually happening were millions-to-one, but realistically, practically everything that happened in the world was a million-to-one chance, wasn't it?

Clear gazed down into the box of scrap metal and computer innards at her feet, studying the circuit boards with their teeny-tiny soldered pathways and circuits. In a way, she thought, the whole world was a bit like a giant computer. Every tiny, seemingly trivial choice each person made every single waking moment of their lives was fed into the system, endlessly combining with every other choice made by everyone else in the system, to produce new and ever increasingly complex patterns and programs, that in turn fed back to influence the people and events that had caused them in the first place... Kind of like a giant circuit.

Whether each individual choice was made deliberately or by accident; whether the consequence was expected or unexpected, the end result was the same—there existed a new addition to the pattern; another link in the chain, feeding back endlessly on itself like a never ending Möbius strip. Inside a computer, these patterns could simulate anything: love, war, death, space, time, and even life itself.

No matter how complex the program, and however intelligent you imagine the outcome to be, the code was always made up of the same old thing: zeros and ones. That was all the computer's 'brain' could comprehend. Yes or no. To live or to die. To be or not to be. That was all that ran the world. Simple, everyday choices, multiplied to the  $n$ th degree by everyone else's choices, and fed back into the system through their effects on everyone else.

In the end, that was all fate was: one big chain reaction of cause and effect, infinitely wide and deep, and going nowhere.

Or so it seemed until recently...

Clear reached into the pocket of her nightgown and pulled out a pack of gum. Unwrapping a stick, she popped it into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Alex's talk about death omens had unsettled her. He believed that the universe wasn't just cause and effect. He believed that Death was an actual entity; a malign presence with a plan, something that came after you if you were able to somehow cheat it. It meant that there was something or someone out there actually watching you, a giant celestial puppet master, making sure you did what you were told, and that you were born in the right place, lived the right life and died at the right time, all to fulfill some grand master plan for... what? The cosmic order? Some giant protoplasmic computer program? An intergalactic game of chess?

All this smacked too much of predeterminism for Clear's taste. She liked to believe that she was in control of her destiny, not the other way around; that she could alter the path of her life by her own free will, and that she was the master—or rather, the mistress—of her own ship.

If Alex was right, that meant that she wasn't, and right now, she hadn't a clue what to think about all this.

Clear shifted uncomfortably on the bench as Alex's voice rang in her head.

*"What if we weren't meant to get off that plane? What if it still is our time?"*

Clear shivered and rubbed her bare arms in a vain attempt to warm up. The whole thing was ridiculous, she could see that now. Fate was after them? Yeah, right. Alex was nothing special. He had

just been in the right place at the right time, and he had made up an elaborate theory to justify himself and make things seem like they made sense when they so obviously didn't. They had survived a plane crash, then two of the survivors had died. It was hardly conclusive evidence that the universe and everything in it was being controlled by some giant, all-seeing superpower that was now out to get them.

So why did she get goose bumps every time she thought about what had happened?

Clear gazed at the sculpture thoughtfully, a burning flash of resentment towards Alex running through her. She needed an answer to all this, right now, but he was too wrapped up in his own overinflated idea of the order of the universe to give her one.

He thought he was God's gift? Well, guess what?

He wasn't.

Not even close.

Clear wasn't even sure at that moment whether there was a god or not, but if there was, she could imagine that he or she was up there laughing at her.

Annoyed, Clear tilted her chin and impulsively spat her chewing gum at the sculpture of Alex. The gum stuck right in the mathematical dead-center of the sculpture's stained glass head, and Clear sighed.

Great. Now the sculpture looked like it had an eye as well as teeth.

It seemed to be winking at her.

Getting up off the bench with a grimace, Clear peeled the gum off the sculpture's face and dropped it on the floor. Reaching out automatically, she switched off the propane tank that was attached to her oxy-acetylene torch and stomped off towards the door. Time for bed. She would sort this mess out tomorrow. If she stayed here, she would probably end up doing herself an injury, giving Alex the perfect opportunity to berate her for endangering herself still further when they were so obviously all about to die.

Yeah, whatever.

What if he *did* know which one of them was going to die next?

He would just have to prove it to her.

Clear threw one final glance over her shoulder at the sculpture, shook her head irritably and turned out the light.

Everything would seem better in the morning.

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Three miles away, Alex slumped even further down into his easy chair as his father approached him, looking worried. His dad's lined face was heavy with concern and sympathy as he sat down on the green, upright sofa opposite his son and gazed at the TV, watching quietly as the news item about gas stoves finished.

Oh great, thought Alex tiredly. Here it comes... The big speech.

"Clear's concerned about you," said his dad. His voice was upbeat, trying to be practical in the face of overwhelming circumstances. "I'm concerned about you. Why don't you want to talk to her... or me?"

Alex sighed. He didn't need this shit. He hadn't even begun to process the events of the day, and the last thing he wanted to do was have a big heart-to-heart with his pops about how he was feeling.

Everybody always asked him how he was feeling. Did they want to know the truth? Because in all honesty, he was feeling sick of everyone asking him how he was feeling.

Why couldn't they all just leave him the fuck alone?

He rolled his head to one side and made a brave attempt at a smile.

"Dad, you and Mom have both been a big help., but there's something I need to understand before I can talk... to anyone.

Mr Browning nodded thoughtfully, tightening his lips in disappointment. He wished Alex would at least *hint* at what was troubling him. He knew that it was something more than the bare facts of what had happened. Alex had, in effect, survived a major aviation disaster, and now he was deeply, deeply disturbed. Since Tod's death, he'd hardly said two words to him or to his mother, despite their best efforts to draw him out. The school counselors were making zero headway with Alex, and he didn't know what else he could do. And now, with everything that had happened this morning, Alex seemed to be slipping further and further away from them...



Alex's eyes suddenly lit up and he lunged upright in his chair as his long-awaited news bulletin came on the TV. He grabbed the remote and hit 'Record' before quickly turning up the volume on the set.

His father watched him in concern.

On the screen, a bored looking anchorman shuffled his papers, reading from an autocue.

"The National Transportation Safety Board has a new theory tonight on the possible cause of the explosion of Volee-Air Flight 180." A computer graphic flicked up on the screen, illustrating an area of the lower fuselage.

"Deterioration of silicon insulation on an electrical connector to the scavenger pump may have leaked combustible fluids. A spark in the fuel switch may have ignited the fuel line, and proceeded to the fuel pump..."

The image zoomed in, the CGI image rotating and targeting the area on the rear right side of the digital plane. A big red "X" marked a specific row of seats.

Alex blinked, stunned. The aircraft seating chart was burned into his brain. Without even looking at the papers by his side, he knew that the "X" was right above where he had been sitting on the plane.

So that meant... what, exactly?

He scooted forward onto the edge of his seat, watching intently.

On the screen, the high-tech computer image traced the path leading to the explosion in angry red graphics throughout the plane. A red line representing the fuel line zigzagged its way through the body of the plane, making a sharp turn in towards the fuel pump. Jagged lines moved back through the plane towards the rear, hopping from seat to seat like a lightning strike, and bathed the seats in a soft red light as they passed by.

Alex remained riveted to his seat as the CGI plane exploded with computer-simulated precision. He shivered. The graphics were so clean, so clinical—just like the diagrams in his school textbooks. He'd seen simulations like this a million times before on TV: bomb threats, evacuation attempts, chemical fuel plant explosions.

It sure as hell hadn't looked that neat and tidy from where he'd been sitting on the plane.

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Ten minutes later, Alex sat in his bedroom with his door closed and locked. He was staring hard at his computer screen as he downloaded the computerized schematics of the plane' a frame at a time into his image-editing program. When it was all done, he opened up one of the JPEG files and slapped a hand-drawn blueprint over the top of the computer screen.

Breathlessly, he matched the two images up, the neon-colored graphics shining through the thin paper quite clearly. Alex's face was alight with excitement, painted in flickering blue by the light from the computer monitor. His nail-bitten finger traced the path of the fuel line, starting at the seat marked with a large "X" and the letters "TOD," and then moved over towards the seat marked "TERRY" before resting on a third name.

Alex's eyes widened.

That couldn't be right.

His finger flew to the seating chart to check it out, and he quickly copied the path of the explosion in thick red ink onto his own blueprint. A few bold strokes of his red highlighter confirmed it.

Alex dropped his pen and sat back in his seat, pumped up, his whole body vibrating with a thrill of nervous excitement.

This was it! This was the design!

"The path of the explosion..." he whispered to himself. "They're dying in the order they would've originally died in!" He thumped the paper. "*That's* Death's design!"

He was so elated by his discovery that it took a few moments for the implications to sink in. When they did, his eyes flew back to the seating chart and unwillingly followed the line of the explosion towards the third seat.

After "TERRY," the seat intersecting the path of the explosion was marked "MS LEWTON."

Alex sat back, slack-jawed with fear.

"Ms Lewton's next!"

# EIGHT

Lights glimmered through the darkness of the night, spilling out from the cozy-looking, two-bedroom house set back from the road. Everything about Ms Lewton's home was neat and prim, from the carefully tended garden to the logs stacked in efficient, no-nonsense piles by the front porch. It was an old house, but it had been kept in top shape over the years, looked after with a love and attention to detail that was clearly evident in the shining windows, the immaculate green-striped lawn, and the freshly painted picket fence.

The inside of the house, however, was in chaos, turned upside down by the process of moving. The usually tidy living room was in disarray with boxes stacked in every available space and jumbo-sized rolls of packing material cluttering the hallway.

Valerie Lewton restlessly paced the room with the phone pressed to her ear, dressed casually in a gray T-shirt and sweats. She anxiously twined the cord from the phone around her hands as she spoke, occasionally reaching up to dab at her eyes with a fistful of tissues. She had been on the phone with Laura for over an hour, after a casual call from her good friend to enquire after her well-being had turned into an all-out phone therapy session. She really thought that she had needed it, but rather than making things better, all she had succeeded in doing was scaring herself, as she went over and over the week's events in her mind.

Right now, the fear inside her was so strong, it was threatening to overwhelm her. Ms Lewton paused between sobs, no longer trying to hide the fact that she was crying.

"Whenever I fall asleep, I see Terry Chaney... her blood flying out at me. And in the day, out of nowhere, I hear my own voice inside my head, going, 'No, you know the whole French thing. Get on the plane...'"

She stopped by the sofa and picked fitfully at a velvet cushion. Then she distractedly picked up a pile of battered paperbacks, crossed the room and dropped them haphazardly into a large box that was already overflowing with clothing, ornaments and

paperwork. She had long since given up trying to sort stuff as she was packing. She just wanted everything put in the boxes so she could seal them up and be out of here, *stat*.

Ms Lewton's eyes roved around the room as she listened to Laura's soothing voice on the other end of the phone, and she felt more tears threaten. She still couldn't believe that she was moving. The house was so old and had been in her family forever. Her attic was stuffed full of treasures left behind by her grandparents, and the many discolored, rectangular spots on the walls bore silent witness to the artwork and framed photos that had once been displayed.

A lump rose in her throat as she went on. "Everything here reminds me... of sending Mr Murnau back on the plane. I'm hoping a change will help. I lived here my whole life...." Her voice cracked, but she blew her nose and bravely went on.

"And wherever I looked were great memories, you know... but now all I can see is Larry Murnau... and those kids. Just looking out of my own front yard makes me feel nothing but fear." She suppressed a shiver at the thought of this morning's new developments, and felt her stomach give a great lurch as a wave of nausea overwhelmed her.

There had been so much blood...

Trying to distract herself, Ms Lewton pulled aside the curtain and looked sadly outside at her garden. She had spent so long working on it this summer, and had been so proud of the way the roses had...

*What was that?*

A flicker of movement caught her attention, and her face flooded with alarm.

Outside, a dark figure stood in her driveway.

Ms Lewton strained her eyes, trying to see who it was. The figure turned into the light, and her heart suddenly thumped in her chest.

Alex Browning.

Standing in her driveway, bold as anything.

Staring right at her.

Ms Lewton stepped quickly away from the curtains, her mouth suddenly dry. A full-blown panic attack swept over her, and her grip tightened on the phone. "Laura, I gotta call you back."

Without even waiting for a reply, she hung up and pressed a newly labeled button on her speed dial with a shaking finger. She cleared her throat as the phone was answered by an efficient sounding receptionist.

"This is Valerie Lewton," she said. "Get me Agent Schreck."

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Outside, Alex prowled around Ms Lewton's property, his mind racing. If Ms Lewton was going to die next, there had to be something in or around her house that was going to kill her. He couldn't keep an eye on her twenty-four/seven, but at least he could check her property, and try to figure out what he could do to keep her from harm, until he had worked out a way to break Death's deadly grip on them all...

Alex tried to keep to the shadows, alert for any sign that he had been detected. He checked the street for passers-by, and then crept towards Ms Lewton's car. That was the most obvious thing. A rotted brake cable, a damaged transmission, a single flaw in the engine, and Ms Lewton would be very attractive toast. He would start by making sure the car was safe, and then work his way around the house.

He nodded curtly to himself, feeling like a real superspy. He would beat this fate thing yet.

Approaching the shiny blue-black auto, he gave it the once-over. As a lifelong pedestrian, Alex wasn't really sure what he was looking for, but he felt compelled to check, all the same. After studying the windshield for cracks, he ran a hand over the headlight and knelt down and peered beneath the car, squinting owlishly into the darkness.

No dangling wires or dripping brake fluid. Good.

As he thoughtfully kicked the tires to check that they were fully inflated, an unmarked sedan screeched up beside him, not even bothering to be discreet. Its doors opened with a double *clunk*, and there was a scrunch of grit as two figures got out.

Startled, Alex turned to find Special Agents Schreck and Weine standing in the street, watching him, backlit by the strong headlights

of their car.

Crouching over the tire, he was caught red-handed, blinking painfully in the wash of white light.

Agent Schreck was the first to break the incredulous silence. "What are you doing?"

Alex was nervous, but determined. He told them the truth, wincing as he heard how phony it sounded. "Uh... checking the air in her tires to make sure they're safe?"

The agents stared at him. Surely he didn't expect them to believe a line like that? The kid had to be on drugs.

Finally, here was their proof.

After a moment of incredulity, Agent Schreck snapped, "Get in the car."

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Inside the house, Ms Lewton peeked out through her front curtains, watching as Agent Weine pushed the boy down into the back seat of the car with considerably more force than was necessary. She got more satisfaction than she should have from the bewildered look on Alex's face as he disappeared inside the sleek FBI vehicle. The doors slammed and the car roared off down the road into the night.

She let out her breath in a rush.

She was safe again.

Thank God.

A part of her knew that her intense fear of the boy was irrational. She'd seen the news reports, and she knew that Alex wasn't to blame for the plane crash. She knew that he hadn't killed Tod as he had been nowhere near him at the time of Tod's death. And she had been right there when the bus had hit Terry and splattered her insides all over the...

Oh my God stop thinking about it!

Still, she couldn't shake the bone-deep conviction that somehow, in some way, Alex had been responsible. Every time she saw him, she felt the same rush of terror, the instinctive feeling that somehow, he

was cursed, and that every person he touched, he infected with Death...

It was all just a simple case of traumatic association, soothed the more sane part of her mind. He had been there when bad stuff had happened, and now whenever she saw him those same memories came flooding back.

That had to be it.

She couldn't keep thinking this way or she was going to go nuts.

She released the curtains and moved back, feeling somewhat better, but still rattled. The curtains billowed inwards after her, as if blown by a breeze. Ms Lewton frowned in puzzlement as she moved them aside to find the windows closed. She tensed, feeling strangely unnerved by this, although she couldn't put her finger on why.

Trying to shake her feeling of unease, she moved to a closet door, opened it and clicked on an overhead light. Kneeling down, she tugged on a heavy box and opened it up to check the contents. She really needed to haul it out into the light to be packed up and shipped off, along with the rest of her stuff, but it probably weighed more than she did. She really needed a man around to help with this heavy-lifting stuff... And there was another thought she really didn't want to be getting into right now.

Boy, was she on a roll today?

Something caught her eye, and her expression warmed, recalling a far off memory.

"Oh... Mom's favorite."

She slid a vinyl record album out of its white paper sleeve and moved to the old-fashioned record player on a shelf that was thick with dust. Placing the record on the turntable, she set the needle onto the album.

The opening acoustic guitar of "Rocky Mountain High" filled the room.

Ms Lewton paused, listening, then a soft smile touched her lips. Her momma had played this for her when she was a kid, singing along and improvising crazy harmonies on the chorus, which had never failed to make her laugh. Those were good times, good memories. It was what she needed to hold onto right now.

Ms Lewton finally started to relax. Everything would be alright. There was hope on the horizon. As soon as she got the hell outta this town, her life would finally start looking up.

Smiling, Ms Lewton went back to her packing as John Denver played on.

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At the local police station, Alex sat behind a table in the interrogation room. The cinder block room around him had been painted green, which made Alex think uneasily of hospitals and prisons, and other such places of death.

Hell, everything reminded him of death these days. Death, death, death. It was all around him: in the air, in his head. It was like those people who go on TV saying they've seen the Virgin Mary in a can of Spam.

People will see what they want to see, thought Alex. So what's so wrong with me that I have to keep seeing Death? And can I make it stop now, please?

Agent Weine stared at him across the table, while behind him, Agent Schreck leaned against the wall with his hands clasped, watching Alex with an expression of deep suspicion. Under the relentless glare of the yellow fluorescent lights, Alex looked haggard and gaunt. He had deep circles ringing his eyes, and his skin was sickly pale from sleep deprivation. His jacket was dirty and smudged with dirt, and he hadn't changed his clothes in almost three days. He looked like a criminal, and they were treating him like one. Only his blue eyes were alive, burning with a deep conviction that was almost frightening.

The two detectives watched him uneasily.

Alex cleared his throat, trying to reason with the agents, although he knew that telling them the truth was only going to get him into even more trouble. "I believe that... Ms Lewton's next."

Agent Weine felt his hackles go up. The kid wasn't still on that whole "premonition" kick, was he?

"Next?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.



Alex nodded vehemently. "Yes... see, there's this pattern that's occurring."

"Oh, you've noticed it, too?" said Agent Weine, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice and failing dismally.

Agent Schreck was starting to get frustrated. This was taking too much time. He was tired and fed up, and he just wanted to go home to bed. "So where'd you get this 'pattern' from, Alex? You have another one of your 'visions?' Did you catch it in some TV static?"

Alex was insulted by his condescending tone. He looked up, dark-eyed, his expression serious. He had been caught by these guys once before. He wasn't about to sit here and spill his guts to them a second time without being very sure about what he was doing. He knew Agent Weine didn't believe him, and he made that very obvious. But there was something about the way Agent Schreck looked at him, the tiniest flicker of interest in his dark, watchful eyes that made him think that maybe, just maybe, he had a shot at convincing him.

Alex cleared his throat, glowering at Agent Weine. "You know, I never asked for what happened to me on the plane. You can sit there in your little chairs and make fun of me. Whatever. It's fine. But I saved *six lives* on that plane. *Six lives*... And everybody in my entire school thinks I'm a freak."

Alex took a deep breath, his angry gaze flitting between the two detectives. "I'm not suffering from a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I haven't developed a narcissistic deity complex. I'm not going 'Dahmer' on you guys, okay? This just is." Alex pointed directly at Agent Schreck. "There's a pattern for us all. There is a pattern for *you*. And *you*." Alex stabbed a finger at Agent Weine, trying to engage him, his voice calm, forceful, almost hypnotic.

"There's a design for *everyone*. And I don't know how yet... but I intend to break this one."

The agents shared a look. They were going to be in here for a while.

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Meanwhile, Ms Lewton was in her kitchen, trying to decide whether or not to make a cup of tea. It was a tiny decision, utterly

inconsequential to the rest of the world, but she felt it was an important one for her.

It was all about getting back in control.

On the phone, Laura had told her to take things one hour, one day at a time, and Ms Lewton had taken her advice to heart. Forget moving house, leaving town and figuring out what the hell to do with her life. She would simply decide what kind of tea she wanted, then make herself a cup, have a bit of a sit down and read a book, then get on with her packing.

The rest would come later.

Decision made, Ms Lewton removed the chrome teapot from the stove and moved over with it to the sink, enjoying the John Denver LP still playing in the next room. She turned on the faucet and poured water into the kettle. Some water spilled down the side, and she idly wiped at the pot with a blue checked hand towel to clean it.

As she did so, the surface of the polished chrome kettle momentarily darkened, and a flickering shadow appeared to move across it, as though somebody had passed behind her.

Ms Lewton spun around and stared at the room behind her. She could've sworn she'd seen something move on the periphery of her vision, but no, she was alone. Spooked, she peered out into the hallway towards the main door. The leaves rustled on a potted plant beside the door, as though moving in the wind.

Okay, now she really was losing it.

Ms Lewton shook herself, and absently tossed the towel onto the kitchen counter. It caught on a knife blade held in the cutlery block, but she didn't notice, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of tea.

Crossing over to the stove, she turned on the gas and carefully adjusted it. As she put the kettle on the stove, however, the flames blew out.

Ms Lewton paused, her nerves on edge. She could've sworn she felt the air move behind her. Once again, she turned around, sweeping the room with a glance, but there was really nothing there. All the doors and windows were double-locked—she'd checked them herself an hour ago, before calling Laura.

Trying to control her nerves, Ms Lewton grabbed a nearby pack of matches to reignite the ring. Lighting one, she leaned in towards the gas stove, match held high.

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Back at the police station, Agent Weine sat across from Alex, trying to be sympathetic and professional, but coming across as tired and bored, which he was. He suppressed a yawn as he tried to reason with the kid, trying some logic on him. He had to find out what the deal was, so he could write it down in one of his little folders, photocopy it a couple times, mail it out to the relevant legal parties, and then get some sleep before he went completely crazy.

"Alex, you came to our attention at first because you were under suspicion in the plane explosion."

Alex tensed, but Agent Weine shook his head, anticipating his thoughts. "I know you didn't blow up that plane. I don't believe you have magical powers. We were ready to move on, but then the other survivors started to die. First your friend Tod, then Terry Chaney while you were there, at the scene. And now tonight we pick you up at Val Lewton's house."

Agent Weine steepled his hands, peering at Alex over the top of his glasses like a disapproving school teacher. "Alex, no one has any control over life and death, unless that person is taking lives and causing death." He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes boring into Alex. "Can you promise me that no one else will die?"

*That's a stupid thing to ask if he doesn't believe me,* thought Alex. Out loud, he said, "No... I can't. As long as I'm in here, it's outta my control. I'm sorry."

The agents were taken aback by his answer, unnerved by the sincerity in his voice. Agent Weine glanced at his partner who was leaning back on the wall, staring hard at Alex as though trying to make up his mind about him. Schreck hadn't said a word in a while, and he was getting exhausted trying to play "good cop, bad cop" all by himself. It just didn't work, and he felt like the whole situation was getting out of control.

Agent Weine didn't like being out of control. It made him feel like his asshole father, who had let everyone walk all over him every day of his lousy, stinking life...

Frustrated, Agent Weine turned back to Alex. There was only one thing left to do if he was going to get any sleep before dawn, and he didn't like it one bit. He motioned towards the unlocked door.

"Alright, go ahead. Get outta here," he said brusquely.

"Thank you." Alex jumped to his feet gratefully, and with a quick nod to Agent Schreck, made a beeline out of the room.

The door swung closed behind him with a light *click*.

Agent Schreck shivered, watching him go. "Kid gives me the creeps."

Agent Weine shrugged, letting some of his bitterness show in his voice. "We got nothing to hold him on."

Agent Schreck shook his head, leaning back against the wall with a strange look on his face. "I don't mean that." He stared after Alex through the window in the top of the door and swallowed, trying to put into words something that might get him thrown off the case. "There were a couple of times, there... when I almost believed him."

Weine considered this, the light glinting on his thick prescription glasses. "Don't take this the wrong way," he told his partner, "but sometimes, *you* give me the creeps."

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Ms Lewton's thoughts were still firmly engaged with tea making. She was getting sleepy as bedtime neared, and hoped that the caffeine would help keep her awake a bit longer, so she could finish packing up the shelves in the living room. She dropped two tea bags into the steaming hot water, watching them swell and bubble, and picked up the cup, raising it towards her lips...

She gave a yelp of fright, spun round, and reflexively hurled the tea out of the cup onto the ground. She quickly put the empty mug down on the kitchen counter and backed away from it, trembling.

The logo of the Mount Abraham High Fighting Colonials stared out at her, as though gloating.

A wave of goose bumps crawled over Ms Lewton as she realized that she'd nearly taken a sip from the school mug. She took a long, deep breath, trying to get a hold of herself.

"You gotta stop this! It's just a stupid mug," she said loudly, hoping that the sound of her own voice would reassure her. "You're outta here," she reminded herself firmly. "Pretty soon, you'll be gone."

Time to take some decisive action. She could beat this thing. Screwing up her courage, Ms Lewton crossed the kitchen in two quick strides and yanked open the refrigerator. Grabbing some ice and a bottle of Polish vodka from the freezer compartment, she turned back to the mug and glared down at it.

She was stronger than this. She had to regain control of her life, and this was a start.

*Plunk! Plunk!* She dropped two ice cubes into the offending mug, and poured herself a giant shot of the ice-cold vodka.

There. Vodka in a school mug.

Perfect.

As she turned away to grab something to stir it with, an almost inaudible splintering sound came from the mug. The freezing cold liquid crazed the thin china, which was still hot from the boiling tea that had just been poured into it. A small crack sizzled up the side of the cup, and vodka started dripping out of the base, forming a small pool on the kitchen counter.

Not noticing the crack, Ms Lewton lifted the cup and took another sip, grimacing as the cold vodka sizzled on her fillings and seared a fiery trail to her stomach.

Best cure for butterflies in the stomach, she thought grimly. Kill the fuckers stone dead.

Leaving the bottle by the stove, she walked across the pine floor towards the living room, cup in hand. A trail of alcohol drips followed her, like alcoholic breadcrumbs.

In the background, John Denver sang on.

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Alex picked up speed as he left the police station's parking lot and started heading back down the long straight road towards town. It was dark and the road was badly lit, but he kept going, too impatient to wait for the bus. His talk with the detectives had done nothing to shake his sense of paranoia that something bad was about to happen, and if anything, it had made him more determined to get back to Ms Lewton's house so that he could check up on her.

The detectives had kept him detained for nearly forty minutes, which to him, was forty minutes too long. Anything could've happened to Ms Lewton in that time. For all he knew, she could be dead already. He would scout around, check the area around the house for obviously dangerous things, and then lie low and keep a lookout. He had been careless last time—that was all. This time, he would keep his distance, and just keep an eye on things. There was no way he was going to go home and leave her unprotected.

If anything happened to her, he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

Alex glanced over his shoulder to check that he wasn't being watched, and increased his walking pace to a brisk jog, anxiously scanning the road ahead. He wanted to get back to Ms Lewton's house as quickly as possible.

If his theory about fate was wrong, he would be the first person to admit it. He wasn't stupid. He knew how crazy he had sounded at the police station, raving about fate and patterns and shit.

But if he was right...

As he walked out onto the main road, something caught his attention, and he slowed his pace, sniffing the air. Was that something burning? As he turned the corner, he saw a man standing by the side of the road, raking a big pile of fallen autumn leaves up into a crackling bonfire.

Alex instantly tensed. Fire. That couldn't be good. His paranoia kicked in and his mind started whirring. In his current state of mind, everything seemed like a sign to him.

So Ms Lewton was gonna burn to death? Was that it?

A breeze kicked up and Alex stiffened, a feeling of dread creeping over him. He could almost feel the presence of... what? Death? Fate?

Whatever the hell that thing was that was stalking them, it was close.

He could almost feel it...

Smoke wafted and swirled around him as the breeze lifted the debris, and a half-dozen burning leaves sailed past him through the air, blazing merrily. Alex watched them as they flew past his face, automatically counting them.

Six burning leaves?

Alex's mouth went dry.

If that wasn't a sign, then what was?

He glanced nervously up the road. The sky was dark over the town, but the glare from the fire seemed to tint the sky, creating a haze over the rooftops. As he stared into the jumping flames, Alex reached a decision.

Screw the police. He had to get back to Ms Lewton's house to make sure she was okay, right now. He didn't care who saw him go.

Alex set off down the road at a dead run.

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In her perfectly furnished living room, Ms Lewton stood staring around her. She hadn't yet touched this room, mainly because it was so full of things that needed to be wrapped before they could be moved. A lifetime of memories swamped her: of friends and family and fun times she had enjoyed inside these four walls, and she wiped quickly at her eyes before marching resolutely over to the large packing crate that stood empty in the corner of the room.

One thing at a time.

First, she would empty the shelves, and then she would sort out the cabinets. If she started now, the room would be done in a day or two.

Feeling emboldened by the shot of vodka coursing through her system, Ms Lewton strode over to the desk that was set against the far wall, and leaned over her computer monitor to pick up the large roll of bubble wrap that was stashed down the back, taking a hearty sip from her mug as she did so. Man, that stuff was good! There was

only one butterfly left in her stomach now, lying belly-up on the floor of her tum with its wings waving weakly, begging for mercy.

Die, fucker, die!

As she took a second, determined sip, a stream of vodka dribbled out of the hole in the bottom of her cup and splashed on top of the monitor. Ms Lewton didn't notice. She was far too busy grieving for her collection of travel souvenirs, which were sitting on the shelf above the computer. She had spent the last five years collecting them and getting them arranged beautifully on her shelf. Not that this mattered now, since they were all going in the box with everything else.

She gazed at them, misty-eyed, and then sighed and picked up a cow horn from Africa. She had gone there on a school trip a couple years ago, with her class from...

Oh no, no. No thoughts of school trips. Ms Lewton shook herself. No more school. Ever.

Quickly banishing horrific images from her mind, she set her mug down on the edge of the desk with a *clank* and resolutely tore off a large piece of plastic bubble wrap. She then started to carefully wrap up the cow horn.

Inside the computer monitor, the spilled vodka dripped down through the top air vent and splashed onto the metal housing of the cathode ray tube. Running downwards in small icy droplets, the vodka formed a little pool on top of the circuit board connected to the power transformer, causing the current to temporarily surge. The transformer buzzed bad-temperedly at the intrusion, and then a blue spark leapt out of the step-down coil as the liquid conducted electricity between two soldered contacts.

With a small, wet *pop*, the transformer overloaded.

Behind it, the rubber insulation on the power cable that ran out of the box to the wall started to melt, smoke starting to drift upwards towards the ventilation grille.

Ms Lewton finished wrapping the cow horn and placed it in a box, then frowned as a strange crackling noise came from the computer monitor.

Oh, for heaven's sake. What now?



Straightening, she stepped up to her desk and peered cautiously at the monitor, her pretty face screwed up in puzzlement. Wispy smoke was drifting out of the top.

Okay, that wasn't good. Probably some kind of power surge playing merry hell with the circuitry. She should probably unplug it, just in case.

Sighing, Ms Lewton leaned forward in front of the screen, her hand groping for the power switch located on the wall behind it.

*Ka-blam!* The monitor suddenly exploded in a blinding flash of white flame. Sparks and glass flew through the air as the shorted fuses blew the vacuum-sealed ray tube. Ms Lewton screamed in pain as a large jagged shard of glass from the monitor shot outwards and buried itself into her neck. Reflexively, she reached up to pull the glass out, and staggered backwards across the room, clutching her throat as blood started pouring between her fingers in horrifying quantities. She couldn't believe it was all coming from her.

Severed jugular vein, she thought dazedly, her expression sickeningly numb. That means I have... how long to get help?

Her mind clouded as a tidal wave of shock hit her, filling her head with a wash of black static. Gasping in fright, she quickly stumbled back towards the kitchen, blindly banging into furniture and stumbling over boxes, blood pouring from her throat and pattering down onto the floor. Her foot slipped in her own blood and she fell forward, grabbing onto the record player for support. The needle skipped and bumped back over the record... and unmercifully settled back at the beginning of "Rocky Mountain High."

In the kitchen, Ms Lewton glanced around, wild-eyed, desperately pressing her hand to her throat as she gurgled and choked on the blood from the wound. Pale from blood loss, she looked frantically around, searching for something to staunch the flow. She grimaced in agony, and her legs started to buckle as her body went into shock.

She clutched at the kitchen table, fighting to stay upright, then jumped as a loud *bang* came from the living room. The main power point behind the monitor had overloaded and abruptly blew up, vomiting white sparks onto the wooden floor. Several sparks fell into the puddle of vodka beneath the desk, where it pooled around the

now-empty cup that had dropped down onto the floor. The pure alcohol ignited with a rush, blue-hot flames jumping a foot in the air and sizzling quickly across the floor. As the flames rode the snake-like trail of spilled vodka through the room, it traced Ms Lewton's original path from the kitchen.

It was almost as though the fire was chasing her.

Reaching the kitchen, the fire shot towards Ms Lewton at high speed, as though drawn by a magnet, racing past her feet and quickly reaching the puddle of vodka spilled under the stove. The flames licked at the underside of the unit, rushing down the tube that fed gas to the small pilot light...

*Whomph!* The gas stove exploded, flames erupting out of the exposed burners in a blast of blue-hot fire. Ms Lewton screamed, throwing up a hand to shield her face from the heat of the explosion. As she did so, her foot slipped on her own blood and she pitched forward onto the floor, unable to catch herself in time. An instant later, the top blew off the vodka bottle next to the stove as the fire washed over it, igniting the alcohol and mixing itself an impromptu Molotov cocktail.

Ms Lewton curled up tightly on the ground as glass and burning alcohol showered down around her, gasping and choking as the fumes engulfed her. The rest of the alcohol poured out as the exploded bottle upended, adding fuel to the small inferno currently blazing away in the corner of the kitchen. Flames licked upwards, turning the wallpaper to charcoal and racing around the edge of the kitchen, seeking more fuel.

Lying sprawled on the floor and bleeding to death amid the burning ruins of her home, Ms Lewton screamed.

\*\*\*

Alex sprinted up the road toward Ms Lewton's house, legs pumping, jacket flying out behind him. He had been running flat out for several streets now, and he was exhausted. The damp night air caught in his throat and a stitch painfully cramped his side, but

something in him urged him onwards, warning him not to slow down even for a minute.

A minute was all the time it took for someone to die, after all.

He couldn't take that risk.

He urgently squinted into the darkness as he approached Ms Lewton's house, looking for signs of trouble. From a distance, everything looked fine, but the closer he got to the house, the more certain he became that something was wrong. He could just *feel* it. Like a compass needle pointing north, all of Alex's instincts were pointing him towards this house. Death was in his blood, and right now, he could hear it laughing at him.

He only prayed that he wasn't too late.

He skidded to a halt on the wet grass beside Ms Lewton's car and finally stopped to catch his breath, sweating. His eyes raced around the house, searching for signs of danger.

Lights twinkled. Crickets chirped.

It all looked perfectly normal.

As Alex started trotting warily towards the house, feeling slightly foolish for getting himself in such a panic, a hoarse, macabre scream came from behind the walls.

Stunned, Alex froze, his blood turning to ice.

Then adrenaline hit him and he started racing towards the back door.

He knew he'd been right; he *knew* it!

\*\*\*

In the kitchen, Ms Lewton lay on the floor in a pool of her own blood, watching with dazed, disbelieving eyes as her kitchen burned to the ground around her. She was deathly pale, bathed in thick, bright red blood from her open neck wound.

This can't be happening, she thought weakly. A moment ago everything had been fine. She had been packing and listening to her mom's old record.

Now she was in this nightmare, and she couldn't wake up.

In the background, the John Denver LP cheerily played on, caught on a loop.

Ms Lewton could hardly hear it through the thundering in her ears. She gulped as she struggled to breathe, feeling hot blood running down the inside of her esophagus. She knew that wasn't good. The flow had slowed now, and the part of her that was still rational realized that this was because she was running out of blood.

An icy calm descended on her.

Focus.

Stop the bleeding.

Ms Lewton's eyes lit on the blue and white checked towel dangling over the edge of the kitchen counter. Moving on pure survival instincts, she stretched her blood-slicked fingers upwards, inch by agonizing inch, then grabbed the towel and pulled... tipping over the cutlery block it was snagged on. The block fell over with a *bang* and all six razor-sharp knives slithered out, bouncing on the counter and plummeting downwards towards her bleeding, prone form...

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A second scream rang through the air as the back door flew open and Alex burst into the house. He skidded to a halt on the polished pine floor, his eyes urgently scanning the room. Out of breath, he trotted forward through the room and stopped dead.

Blood.

On the floor, everywhere.

Alex's heart sped up as he ran through into the kitchen, disbelieving, following the gory trail. Then he turned the corner and came face-to-face with a scene from his worst nightmares.

The kitchen was on fire. Glass and charred packing crates were strewn liberally around, blazing merrily. Flames leapt up from the blackened stove, licking hungrily up the kitchen wall as though seeking to devour the room itself. Bloodstained handprints marked the walls, the table, the chairs...

And on the floor...

"Ms Lewton!"

Alex rushed forward. Ms Lewton lay on her back on the kitchen floor amid a sea of broken glass, trembling and pale. She was bathed in blood and was clutching her throat from which more blood gushed in alarming quantities.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

A large kitchen knife was sticking out of her chest.

Oh, fuck!

The bottom fell out of Alex's world. Sweat broke out in his forehead, and he stood and stared at his teacher in shock. She was still alive, if only just, clinging to life by a mere thread. Sensing his presence, she looked up at him, through him, an expression of sick horror on her face, then reached out a trembling hand towards the knife, as though to pull it out.

"Ms Lewton! Just stay still, okay?"

Alex bounded over to her and quickly knelt down next to her. Crap! What the hell could he do? He tried, unsuccessfully, to recall his basic first aid class. Should he pull out the knife, or would that make the bleeding worse? Or should he just dial 911 and let the ambulance guys deal with it?

Ms Lewton's expression haunted him, and as he leaned over her she turned pleading eyes on him, unable to speak. Tears of pain and terror ran down her pretty cheeks, soaking into her tangled hair. Alex saw with a jolt of unreality that her throat had somehow been cut, a jagged hole in her neck pumping blood in time with the slowing beat of her heart...

Oh, this was so, so bad...

*Creeeeaaaakkk...Klunk!* Alex whipped around as the wooden shelving on the wall above the stove gave way, the support struts burned out by the blaze. Glass jars and bottles clattered downwards in an avalanche of noisy kitchenware. As Alex ducked down in panic, one of the gas lines on the stove erupted with a loud *bang*, sending everything on the kitchen surfaces flying.

Alex threw himself to one side as the substantial explosion singed the side of his face. He hit the ground and rolled, shielding his head with an arm, and then glanced up cautiously to check on Ms Lewton.

In dreamy slow-motion, he saw a kitchen chair start to topple towards her, knocked over by the force of the explosion.

Alex watched, eerily calm, as the back of the falling chair struck the kitchen knife projecting out of Ms Lewton's chest, driving the blade all the way through her body.

Ms Lewton jerked once, and was still.

Time stopped. Alex stared down at the suddenly motionless figure of his English teacher, listening to the flames *crackle* and *pop* all around him.

She wasn't breathing.

Then the world ramped back up to full speed. Alex leapt towards Ms Lewton, pushing the chair off her, and unthinkingly snatched the blade out of her body with a cry, desperately hoping that this would restore her life.

It didn't.

She was stone-cold dead.

"Oh God! Oh God, Ms Lewton!"

Ms Lewton stared up at him with sightless eyes, her face eerily peaceful. Alex stood over her, the bloody knife still clutched in one white-knuckled fist. As the seconds ticked by, he suddenly saw himself as though from above. He slowly turned his head to look at the knife in his hand, then looked down at the dead body of Ms Lewton, lying at his feet.

She was surrounded by bloody boot prints.

*His* boot prints.

And now, his fingerprints were on the knife.

Time froze again as a sick realization started to trickle through Alex. He had just placed himself into a hell of a bad situation...

The knife fell with a clatter from his suddenly nerveless fingers. Then Alex turned and sprinted out of the house as fast as his legs would carry him.

\*\*\*

It was coming up to ten pm. Billy Hitchcock was out on his newly repaired bike, pedaling home through the neighborhood and

enjoying the night air, when he saw a strange sight. Alex Browning burst out of Ms Lewton's house and started running towards him, his face slack with fear.

Billy shook his head. What had Ms Lewton said to Alex this time? He wished those two would just cool it off and make friends again. He'd forgiven Alex, and he only wished Ms Lewton would too. Besides, after seeing him barf like that when Terry got splatted the other day, how could she still be afraid of him?

Billy certainly wasn't. In fact, he was currently working on a scam involving Alex and several local bookies, depending on if Alex could pull his whole "seeing the future" thing once a month, the pair of them would have enough money to get into any college they wanted. Billy only hoped that Alex would be as excited as he was about it.

Raising an eyebrow in interest, Billy stopped his bike and turned to follow Alex as he tore across the grass.

"Hey, Alex," he called out casually.

Alex completely ignored him. Billy realized that he was totally unaware of his presence. The guy looked like he'd seen a ghost.

A strange sound caught Billy's attention. As Alex ran on, heading for the road, he curiously turned back towards Ms Lewton's house...

...which violently exploded, the doors and windows blowing out in a brain-seeringly intense burst of orange fire and sound.

Billy was knocked off his bicycle for a second time that day, not even aware that he was screaming as he fell backwards onto the wet asphalt, the edge of the blast scorching his face. Debris was propelled twenty feet into the air by the explosion, and the roof caved in as the main support beams gave way. Billy lay on the ground yelling as the world blazed brightly around him in a deafening burst of noise. He could feel the heat of the blast, even through his thick jacket and combat pants, and he shielded his eyes with an arm as the intense light scorched his retinas.

*What the hell was going on?!*

As the echoes of the blast subsided, Billy disbelievingly raised his head, his ears ringing. His eyebrows flew to the top of his hairline as he watched Ms Lewton's house start to burn, blazing madly as flames enthusiastically engulfed the ancient wooden timbers. A moment

later, a five-foot section of roof landed less than three feet away from where Alex was sprawled, flames crackling and popping in the grass around him. Burning embers floated down from the sky like autumn leaves.

Alex!

Billy turned to stare at his fallen classmate who was now propping himself up on an elbow, staring at the exploded house in horror, as if he hadn't known that was about to happen.

Billy gulped as the full implications of this hit home. From where he was standing, or rather lying, he could only draw one conclusion.

Alex had just blown up Ms Lewton's house.

Holy shit!

Billy stared at Alex, all his former frames of reference for this guy gone, as his classmate scrambled upright and fled off down the road without so much as a backward glance, disappearing into the darkness of the unlit neighborhood. Billy let him go, afraid to even move in case he drew Alex's attention. Dude had just run right past him and hadn't even seen him. He must be pretty far gone.

Billy pushed himself up on his elbows and turned his attention back to the blazing house, wondering whether he should go and try to rescue Ms Lewton. But even as the thought crossed his mind, he realized how futile it would be. Nobody could've survived that explosion. Look, the whole roof had caved right in! The fire was burning so brightly that the garden was lit up like it was daytime. If Ms Lewton was still in there, she was toast.

In the distance, the ghostly wail of sirens sounded.

Billy stared fixedly into the fire, and slowly, an unwelcome thought entered his mind.

Of the six survivors who had got off Flight 180, three had suffered horrible deaths.

And Alex had been at the scene of every single one.

Billy cleared his throat, goose bumps breaking out all over him.

"Dude," he said softly.



# NINE

Agent Schreck arrived home around nine pm, which was earlier than he did most nights. The guys up at HQ had a full team working on this case, and the chief had sent them home early, telling them that he wanted his two main operatives to be fresh for tomorrow, ready for a long, fruitful day of investigative work.

Yeah, fruitful my ass, thought Agent Schreck irritably. They want me gone so they can have a couple of beers without me telling them exactly what section of the "Safety At Work Act" they're violating.

Scraping up the pile of mail from his doormat, he opened the door and clicked on the light. His apartment was small, but meticulously clean, a threadbare, but expensive-looking, three-piece suite taking up most of the living room. The only other prominent feature in the room was a large, ornate wooden dresser with a luxurious, five-foot long fish tank on top of it, which contained a bewildering number of exotic marine creatures. Nearby, a heavy china vase, containing a bunch of wilted red roses, sat beneath a single shelf bearing a selection of used paperback books and a couple of framed photos. A strangely high-tech-looking CD player sat on top of the books, bending their pages under its weight.

Agent Schreck put his briefcase down on the table and crossed the room in a few leisurely strides. Yawning, he took a pot of goldfish food down off the shelf, unscrewed the top and scattered a few flakes into the tank. The fish fed hungrily, turning the water into a seething mass of bubbles and snapping mouths. Schreck watched them for a few moments in mild amusement before replacing the pot on the shelf and wandering across to the sofa.

He kicked off his shoes and flopped down on the cushioned seat, picking up the local paper and idly flicking through it. There was an article about the Flight 180 crash on page twelve. Last month's headline disaster was already yesterday's news.

Agent Schreck read it carefully, then got out a large pad of paper and jotted down the journalist's name and contact details, just in case.

Even when he wasn't at work, Agent Schreck was always working, much to the dismay of his long-suffering wife, Trudy. In all of their eleven years of marriage, not a single day had gone past when he had not compromised her life in some way by being exactly what he had been hired to be—a top FBI agent. It was all he had dreamed of, all he had worked for, all he had ever wanted. To be finally enrolled in the FBI, to be given that badge and to work with those people—it was the crowning achievement of his entire life.

He had had no time for dating, of course, but when he had met Trudy during an investigation, an angel in a bloodstained gown working as a night nurse, he had been blown away. They had tied the knot just six months later, and for a while, life had been heaven. He had it all: a job he loved, a beautiful wife and all the money he could spend. Finally, he thought that he had made it in the world.

But after six years they still had no children, and then a routine checkup had revealed something very bad indeed. Trudy was infertile; a glitch in her genetic makeup which meant that she could never give her husband the children he longed for. One tiny, biological mistake—a chromosome that *zigged* when it should have *zagged*—and their hopes for parenthood had been dashed forever.

Agent Schreck sat back in his chair, gazing ruminatively at the blank TV screen before him. Not a day had gone past when he didn't curse fate for letting this happen to him, for singling out Trudy, of all the millions of women in the world, to have this happen to her. He knew that he had no control over fate, and that things could've been far worse for her, but at the same time, he couldn't help but resent every healthy looking, young mother he passed in the street, cradling their bouncing bundles of joy. The world was overflowing with people who could have children, positively teeming with them, but the only woman in the world who mattered to him, the only woman he loved, would never know the joy of bringing a new life into the world.

Put quite simply, it wasn't fair.

Now his crushing caseload was taking him further and further away from her. Although he believed somewhat that they were both subject to the whims of fate, Agent Schreck balked at the thought

that there was a design to the universe, and that this was how their lives were supposed to be. Every night, they both came home to an empty house. He got in after Trudy had gone to bed to try catch some z's before her night shift, and when she got home the following morning he was already at work. In the last month, they had spent a grand total of three hours together when her car wouldn't start and she had actually been in when he got home.

He had forgotten how beautiful she still was.

They had gone out for a quick meal together while they waited for the mechanic, and he had bought her a bunch of red roses from the young Mexican woman who had canvassed their table. Thinking back, Agent Schreck thought that it had probably been the best night of his entire year so far, even though it had earned Trudy a reprimand from the hospital.

Agent Schreck sighed, rubbing his eyes so that purple light danced across his vision. He realized that the pattern of their lives could be broken, but they were both unwilling to give up their careers, content to coast along as they were and hope that somehow, everything would work out... They seemed content to keep pretending that their marriage wasn't falling apart.

A child would've forced a rethink—one or both of them would've had to cut back their hours and drop a couple of shifts a week so they could spend more time with each other. But fate had denied them that, so why should they even bother? If that was how things were meant to be, then why fight it?

Agent Schreck's stomach growled, and he realized that he was starving. He gave a cursory glance towards the bedroom—the door was still open, which meant that Trudy hadn't yet come back from her double shift. Tossing the paper down onto the seat, Agent Schreck got up and wandered hazily through into the kitchen. Three minutes later he returned to his chair with most of the contents of the refrigerator layered between two slices of bread.

He ate it and felt much better.

Tossing the empty plate down onto the coffee table, Agent Schreck pottered over to his CD player, switched it on, and put on some light jazz to lift his mood. Then he sat back in his seat, cracked open a can

of beer, and finally allowed himself to think about the Browning case to take his mind off his own worries.

There was something about the kid that disturbed him deeply. All his talk of fate had touched a raw nerve in Agent Schreck. That little spiel of his, about there being a design for everyone... It had taken all of his self-control to stop himself from challenging the kid, asking him what the hell right a kid his age had to go around making such grand proclamations. Anyone who knew Agent Schreck well would've spotted the dangerous glint to his eye, the furrow in his brow and the rigidity of his posture, and gotten the hell out of the room. Especially after the week he'd just had.

But not Alex. Alex had assumed that he was listening carefully, and had chosen to direct his little rant at him.

Well, that was just great.

Agent Schreck had studied psychology and body language till it came out of his ears, and despite his annoyance at Alex, he wasn't a fool. He knew that people could convince themselves that anything was true, and that Alex didn't have to be right in order to act like he genuinely was right.

There was something about Alex's case that just didn't ring true. The State Police Department had brought in the FBI because they thought Alex had something to do with the plane crash. The technical forensics report had now refuted that, but they were still left with a finger of doubt hanging heavily over Alex's head. Personally, he had been prepared to write the boy's "premonition" off as a random coincidence or as a weird jest of fate, but then the other survivors had started dying, casting an even longer shadow over Alex's name and arousing a gnawing suspicion in Agent Schreck's mind.

Agent Schreck licked the last of the ketchup off his hands and then wiped his sticky fingers on a paper napkin, mulling over the case. All he knew was that those kids were dying, and Alex had been at or near the scene of every single death. He knew that it was good policing to suspect those people who stuck around after a crime rather than those who didn't. Criminal psychology was a breeze to him, and this seemed like such an open-and-shut case that he wondered why he was even bothering.

So, they had nothing to hold Alex on? Big deal. He had access to some of the most in-depth personal records on the planet, through the all-encompassing networks of the FBI databases. If this boy had ever set so much as one foot wrong—flipped off a teacher, stolen smokes from a supermarket, jaywalked across an intersection—he could haul him in on it, using one of the thousand or so tiny loopholes in the law he had specially memorized for such a circumstance. If Agent Schreck thought that he would be saving lives, he had no qualms about locking the boy up until the truth—in one form or another—finally came to light.

Still, the maddening fact remained that he suspected that this wouldn't make a blind bit of difference. His logical mind told him that Alex was directly causing these deaths, in one form or another. Perhaps he had been calling Tod for weeks, guilt-tripping him into taking his own life. Perhaps Alex had somehow pushed Terry Chaney, sending her hurtling into the path of that oncoming bus, contrary to what the eyewitness reports said about how she stepped out into the road of her own free will.

Another part of him, that nagging feeling in his gut that countless thousands of hours in the field had honed to a diamond-sharp point, told him that there was a small chance, an infinitesimally tiny chance, that Alex was telling the truth.

Why kill two of his own friends just to make it look like he had some kind of magical powers of clairvoyance? Agent Schreck didn't buy that. It went against everything he knew about the kid, and about teenagers in general. At that age, they just wanted to be liked, to be respected by their peers. In no way did Alex's actions fit in with that, unless he was some kind of a psycho, and there was nothing in his profile or medical background to evidence that.

Sitting in that interview room with Alex, there had been something about the way he had spoken, something about the way he had calmly held eye contact when he was trying to explain his theories about fate, that had totally bypassed Agent Schreck's logical mind and told him that Alex had been telling the truth, or at the very least he thought he was.

Agent Schreck shook himself, taking a sip of his beer. He hoped secretly that in the morning he would wake up and get that wonderful phone call telling him that Alex had been certified insane and that he could get back to dealing with gang-related murders and foiled bomb attacks. He liked those cases because they were straightforward and he was good at solving them.

It was what he did best, and he was proud of it.

His own life might be going to hell, but at least he was helping the world. That evened things out and made him feel like less of a failure.

In Alex's case, he felt like a failure all round, and he didn't like that feeling.

Not one bit.

A quiet splashing sound intruded on his consciousness, intermingling with the soothing sounds of his jazz CD. Agent Schreck sniffed and looked up. His bleary gaze zeroed in on the fish tank, and he cursed under his breath. One of his fish had gotten caught in the pump again: a pretty red and blue Neon Tetra. The inch-long creature was jammed upside down in the filter, its body blocking the flow of fresh water into the tank. Despite its best efforts to determinedly swim in the opposite direction, it was slowly being sucked up the tube towards the sharp, spinning fins of the motor.

Sighing, Agent Schreck levered himself up out of his armchair and crossed over to the tank. He stood and regarded the madly flailing fish with a look of exasperation. Stupid little critter. Good think he'd noticed it. Two more minutes and it would've been turned into very expensive sushi, and that would've been a cleaning job his stomach wasn't up to at this time of night.

Rolling up his sleeve, he gingerly reached into the tank. Fumbling for the pump catch, he flipped it open and carefully started to unscrew the transparent feeder tube containing the panicked fish.

"So, little one, was that to be your fate?" he asked the fish. "You're lucky I was here to—ah, crap!"

The fish suddenly shot to the top of the tube and stuck there, an inch from the spinning motor. Agent Schreck quickly splashed his other hand into the tank and grabbed the top of the motor, trying to lift it out of the tank before it sucked up any more water. With an

effort, he managed to raise it above the water line, temporarily halting the progress of the fish up the tube.

As he did so, his elbow bumped the vase of dying roses beside the tank. Before he could catch it, the heavy vase tipped over, spilling slimy water onto the floor before plummeting downwards. As it fell, the vase caught on the tangled power cable dangling down from the shelf. The cable pulled taut, then the vase disengaged itself, landing with a splintering crash on the wooden floor.

As Agent Schreck glanced down at it in dismay, there was a soft rushing sound from above him. Paperback books started cascading downwards, plopping into the tank like literary rain and bouncing off the top of the agent's head. Reluctant to let go of the motor and kill the fish, Agent Schreck let them fall, his hands still in the water.

A moment later, something silver flashed past his nose—his prized engagement photo of himself and Trudy. Only one copy of it existed since the original negative had been lost when they last moved house. On pure reflex, Agent Schreck jerked both hands out of the water and snatched at it, catching it mere inches above the water.

An instant later, he was soaked by a huge splash as the CD player fell off the shelf and landed in the fish tank. Within seconds the water started to foam and boil, tiny arcs of blue electricity dancing across the surface.

Agent Schreck leapt backwards as though he had been stung. Hurriedly he glanced around, then grabbed a nearby broom and cautiously extended it towards the wall plug. Hooking the end of it around the plug, he tugged on the handle and pulled the power cable out of the wall.

The buzzing from the tank stopped and the foaming water slowly settled. The CD player sank to the bottom and lay still, bubbling sadly.

"*Goddamn!*"

Agent Schreck peered apprehensively into the tank, clutching his engagement photo to his chest in shock. Dozens of small bodies were already starting to float to the surface, every fish in the tank having been killed by the electricity.

Agent Schreck broke into a sweat as he glanced up at the shelf and then down at the tank, realizing just how close he had come to electrocuting himself.

A thought struck him, and he leaned down and peered into the tank, keeping his distance, just in case. In the underwater tube, the Neon Tetra slowly revolved in the settling water, flash fried along with all its companions and just as dead as it would have been had it been sucked into the motor.

Agent Schreck shook his head sadly. "Sorry, fish. I tried. Guess it was just your ti..."

He paused, thinking. A slow frown crept across his face.

Then he nearly jumped out of his skin as the phone went off shrilly at his side. He snatched it up. "What?"

He listened, and the frown on his face deepened, and then turned to a look of grim bemusement. A moment later, the line went dead and he slowly set the phone down in its cradle.

Agent Schreck stood, staring at his barbecued fish for a while, his hand still on the phone handset.

Then he abruptly grabbed his car keys and strode out of the front door, slamming it behind him.

\*\*\*

"I don't know where he is."

Clear Rivers stood in the open doorway of her house, arms folded, and glared at the FBI agents standing before her.

Agents Schreck and Weine stared back at her, scowls of deep suspicion on their faces, silently cursing her obstinacy. They hadn't yet said a word to her, but she had known what they were about to ask.

To them, that made her suspicious as hell.

Clear looked back and forth between the two agents and shivered, rubbing her bare arms with a paint-smeared hand.

"He's not talking to me," she amended. She sounded more like a grumpy child being quizzed about an argument with a sibling than someone caught hiding the prime suspect in a murder case.



"Why?" Agent Weine was running out of patience with this whole case.

"Because... I didn't believe him." Clear averted her eyes, ashamed.

Agent Weine gave her a look of annoyance. Great. Now the other kids were falling for this mumbo-jumbo superstition crap. As if his job wasn't hard enough...

Agent Schreck, however, accepted her explanation without comment. He studied her for a moment before his eyes took a walk around the artwork in the garage, pausing on a piece of twisted metal from the crash. He frowned.

Clear tensed, expecting a reprimand even though the piece of metal was unrecognizable. She knew it was stupid, but she had a feeling that this particular agent knew a lot more about her than he was letting on.

Agent Schreck finished his inspection of the artwork in the garage and turned to Clear. "If he does contact you, I think it would be in the best interest of your own safety to contact us. Now, here's my card. It's a toll-free number." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a card, and leaned over, cautiously extended it to Clear as though he were handing bread to a wild animal that might just bite his hand off.

Clear took the card without comment and turned it over in her hands, unsure of what else to say. She wanted to find Alex, too. The thought that he was out there, alone in all this, did weird things to her stomach.

She angrily pushed the feeling away. Now was not a good time for having regrets.

As the FBI agents turned to go, Agent Schreck paused, looking straight at the metal sculpture of Alex. Again, there was no way he could've known it was supposed to be Alex, but still, Clear felt a chill run through her at the way the detective's gaze locked in on the sculpture.

"Interesting work," he said, his eyes boring straight through her.

Clear shivered. He knows, she thought. Fuck.

\*\*\*

Blue moonlight shone on the white brick front of Mount Abraham High School as Billy Hitchcock gingerly nosed his mountain bike down the steep, grassy incline towards the Flight 180 memorial. Spotlights lit up the six-foot bronze eagle, making it look spooky.

Billy's eyes flicked nervously around the campus as he drew near, hoping that the security guards weren't around. He'd heard that the penalty for riding his bike on the grass was pretty steep...

A car horn suddenly blared behind him, further jolting his already shredded nerves. With a yelp of fright, Billy instinctively jammed his feet down and leapt off his bike, letting it fall into a tangled heap on the grass before him. Angrily, he spun around to see—

"Carter! You dick!"

Carter's muscle car skidded to a halt behind him, churning up grass and leaving muddy tire marks on the school lawn. He killed the engine and got out, marching over to the memorial and ignoring Billy.

Billy watched him in surprise. Something was different about Carter. His characteristic macho posturing was gone, and his face was drawn, tight with worry. There was something else in there too, something Billy had not expected to see in him.

Carter was afraid.

Billy watched him in surprise, not even realizing that he was staring as he retrieved his much-abused bike from the ground. Carter's eyes met his, and anger flared in their black depths. Wordlessly, Carter flicked the blade of his pocket knife out in Billy's direction, a warning on his face. Then he turned his back on him and faced the memorial. Kneeling at its base, he started to carve something into the marble with the knife.

Billy walked up behind him cautiously as he worked, and watched him with one eyebrow raised. What was with the knife? Between that and the car, boy, did this guy have small dick issues.

Carter swore, digging his knife into the unyielding stone. It didn't even leave a mark. Tears prickled in his eyes and he angrily blinked them back.

"Shit!"

"What are you doing?"

Billy looked up to see Clear Rivers standing in the shadows nearby, watching them. Carter stared at her coldly, then turned back to his work.

"Terry's name should be on this wall," he muttered. He scratched away in vain for a couple more seconds, then gave up with a curse.

Sheathing his pocket knife with a flick of his wrist, Carter got to his feet, staring at Clear defiantly. "So, why'd you want us to meet you here anyway? Huh?"

It was supposed to be a challenge, but it just came out sounding paranoid.

Shit! Carter was really messed up! Billy stared at the jock as he twitched and sniffed, looking anywhere but at Clear. Billy had no personal respect for the guy, but if big, tough guy Carter was afraid, then how was he supposed to feel?

He gulped.

Clear stepped forward and halted a short distance away from them. She folded her arms as she studied them both carefully, her blue eyes pools of liquid shadow in the darkness.

"They're watching me, to see if I go to Alex," she said, then turned to Carter. "That's where you're taking me."

"Why would I want to see him?" asked Carter grumpily.

Clear eyed the two boys and her face darkened. "Because he knows which one of us is next."

\*\*\*

Carter's cherry and black muscle car roared through the night, merging onto the deserted freeway by the US-17 on-ramp, passing by houses, billboards and shops in a blur of streaked light. A road sign hanging overhead read "Middletown—25 Miles. New York City—105 Miles." The rain had eased off and the night was silent, the stars peeking out from behind the smog clouds as though afraid of what they might find down below.

Inside the car, Billy, Clear and Carter sat silently, each alone with their fears. Pounding club music thundered out of the car's speakers, rattling the dirty windows as they drove.

Billy glanced at Carter. The jock was staring straight ahead, jaw clenched, concentrating on the road. He didn't even seem to be aware that the radio was on.

Billy sighed, wondering what Carter's issue was. The guy very obviously had problems, and now the Terry's death had only made them worse, throwing all his paranoid thoughts out on the table and screwing him up even further. How could one guy get so messed up in the head?

Billy knew that he had his own fair share of problems, admittedly most of them revolved around inaccessible girls and that guy at basketball practice who kept stealing his towel and throwing it in the can every week while he was in the shower, but even he had to admit that these perpetual worries paled into insignificance when compared with the problems of the monumental fuck-up that was Carter.

He only hoped that Clear knew what she was doing

As the car rocketed over an intersection, Billy was the first to break the tense silence. "Um... Okay... Drive the speed limit, right?"

Completely ignoring him, Carter anxiously checked out the rearview mirror. If anything, he seemed to be speeding up. In the front passenger seat, Clear turned her head from side to side, scanning the traffic in the rearview mirror for signs of trouble. Nobody seemed to be following them.

For now...

Billy sat back in his seat and tried to relax, and then winced and quickly stuck his head back up between the front seats. "And don't pass on the right," he added helpfully.

Carter suddenly froze. "Billy! I'm getting a vision!" he cried.

Billy paled.

"You're the next one!" gasped Carter.

Billy laughed nervously, although it wasn't at all funny. "Hey, man, why'd you say that?"

Carter scowled. "'Cause if you say another word, I'm gonna fuckin' kill ya."

The car sped on into the night.

\*\*\*

On the outskirts of *Jones Beach State Park*, Alex wandered slowly along the moonlit beach, hands in his pockets. He had no idea where he was going or how he would get there, but felt the need to keep walking nonetheless. He had kicked off his shoes once he had left the road, and they now dangled from one hand while his feet left scuffed footprints in the cool, soft sand.

He hadn't walked barefoot in the sand for ages.

He had forgotten how good it felt.

Alex glanced anxiously out towards the far shore where the bright lights of the city were visible through the hazy smog. He still didn't have a clue how he'd got there. All he knew was that one moment he was in Ms Lewton's house, and the next moment he was here. He had brief, blurred memories of running, of panic and darkness, and then suddenly he had run out of the woods and hit the sea, which meant that he could run no further. It had been a journey of several miles, but he had hardly noticed the distance. Running was good, because running meant that he wasn't thinking.

Thinking was very, very bad right now.

Upon arriving at the beach, he'd scrubbed his hands in the sea till they were raw, washing Ms Lewton's blood off into the chill, black water. Even now he could still feel it on his hands, as though the hemoglobin had somehow leached through his skin and settled in his very flesh, leaving an accusing, bright red stain there for all to see.

The beach was deserted, but Alex had kept one paranoid eye on the shoreline as he washed, half expecting a police helicopter to come thundering down and disgorge dozens of highly trained, black clad SWAT team members clutching AK-47s onto the sand, blinding him with their lights and firing tranq darts at him while he dodged and ducked, running frantically for freedom...

Alex realized that he watched far too many action movies, but still, the constant silence was making him nervous. After a while, a seagull had descended on him, squawking in the hope that he might have food.

Alex had shouted at it to fuck off, and now he felt much better.

He kicked at the sand in front of him as he walked, moodily swinging his shoes and gazing around forlornly, trying to think of anything but Ms Lewton. The ocean loomed on one side of him, while on the other, the jeweled lights of town and the flashing beacon lights of the airport lit up the night air with a foggy, sodium-tinged glow.

So, this was where the plane had come down. Or rather, this was where all that remained of the plane had come down. He had wanted to come out here all month, but was too afraid, lest he stumble on a severed head or a recognizable body part that had washed up on the shore. The news footage on TV had confirmed what he'd seen in his premonition, and what he saw now in person. The shore was littered with tiny scraps of iron from the plane, and he knew now that nothing could've survived that explosion. *Nothing*. The fire had cut through flesh, bone, iron and steel as though they were all one and the same, consuming and devouring like a hungry beast. There was truly nothing left.

Alex glanced fitfully out at the sea, as though even now he expected to see bits of charred wreckage and mangled bodies floating on the tide. The sea behind JFK Airport was still, a light current moving the water restlessly back and forth as though searching for survivors on the bottom of the seabed.

So, wise guy, what next?

Alex chewed his bottom lip as he stood there, his clothes blowing out behind him, caught between two worlds, neither of which wanted him. Everything that had happened was still so completely beyond his comprehension that he was having difficulty processing any of it. This last week had just been one thing after the next. There had been enough freakiness for one person to deal with in their lifetime.

Then this? The survivors all getting bumped off one by one in whacked-out accidents controlled by an all-seeing and all-powerful "fate?" It was just totally beyond his comprehension. In the back of his mind, a small part of him cried out that this was all crazy, that these deaths had to be just a really sick coincidence, and that *he* had control of his life, not fate.

After seeing what he'd seen tonight, he was having trouble believing that was true. Ms Lewton's death had been too twisted, too wrong, too downright malicious for him to believe that it had all been an accident. Again and again in his mind he saw the chair start to topple, saw the back of the chair strike the knife, saw Ms Lewton jerk the life went out of her. One minute she'd been alive, the next she was dead, and even standing right there in the same room, he'd been totally unable to save her.

That wasn't just an accident. That was fate giving him the finger, right in his face, taunting him with how powerless he was to fight back. Even when he'd been at arm's length from Ms Lewton, fate had got past him and slam-dunked the ball, or rather the knife, and then it had sat back on its bony haunches and howled with laughter, as Alex just dug himself deeper and deeper into trouble.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

But it had happened, and now he was just going to have to deal with it.

Alone.

Alex sighed, standing stiffly and looking out to sea, his back to the wind. He felt the cold air stream all around him, whispering in his ear as though trying to talk him into walking into the sea and not stopping till the icy waters closed over his head. That's all he felt like doing. He felt disconnected, remote, as though all of this was happening to somebody else. A month ago, the biggest worry in his head had been whether or not Kerry Williams was going to say "yes" when he asked her to the prom. Now he was a fugitive on the run, wanted in connection with murder and arson, being hunted down like an animal with nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

And his parents! Christ, he hadn't even thought about them! They must be beside themselves, but he had no money for a payphone to call and reassure them that he was alright. Besides which, that was how people got caught, right? The police traced the call, then turned up in big trucks with loudspeakers and baying dogs to haul you in.

No way was he going to let that happen.

If "fate" was hunting him, then he was safest when he was on his own. He couldn't afford to take any chances. The FBI was after him,

the cops were after him, and now the only person that wasn't after him was the one person who might actually be able to understand some of this.

Alex sat down heavily on a sandbank as an image of Clear popped unbidden into his mind. He shook his head like a dog, trying to dispel it. He didn't want to be thinking about her right now. She hadn't believed him. How could she not have believed him? She had been there when Mr Bludworth had given them their warning for chrissakes! And despite the evidence she'd seen with her own eyes, she had chosen to disregard it.

Now, yet another of the Flight 180 survivors was dead, and he wasn't going to be the one to hang around and say "I told you so."

Well, fine. Let her not believe him, but how many more people would have to die before she finally realized that this was no game, that he wasn't crazy, and that Death really *was* out to get them? There were only four of them left, and if what he suspected about the pattern of Death was true, the shocking reality of fate's design would be brought home to her very, very soon.

Only thing was, Alex didn't want that to happen.

He propped his chin up on a fist, wondering vaguely why he cared so much about what Clear thought. Surely Billy would be the one he should go to about all of this? He may be a bit of a putz, but he seemed to have his head screwed on, which was more than could be said for Carter.

That wasn't the point. The thought of anything happening to Clear sent cold shivers down his spine, there was no denying it. There was something about the girl that really got under his skin. He wished he knew what it was.

It wasn't the way she looked, that much was certain. She was a pretty girl, but there were girls in his class who were far more beautiful than her. If he was brutally honest with himself, it was her attitude that really got to him the most. She was a mystery, an enigma, and for some bizarre reason this fascinated him. She was almost painfully shy, but at the same time she was one of the most gutsy, willful people that he had ever met. Outwardly she was fragile and flighty, while inwardly she seemed to be tough as nails,



brimming with an attitude that bordered on hostile, while at the same time being totally, utterly vulnerable.

Then there was the way she looked at him, those deep eyes of hers brimming with secrets and questions that not even he had the answers to.

It was all part of the mystery that was Clear Rivers.

Alex gazed reflectively out at the oily black waters crashing on the shore. He didn't know what made her act like that, but he found himself hoping fervently that he would survive long enough to find out.

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A half hour later, Carter's car pulled up on the side of the road flanking the *Jones Beach State Park*. Clear stepped out of the idling car and anxiously scanned the landscape around them. They were far up by the water, on the steep hill that surrounded the bay. Tall, silent trees ringed the shoreline, waving in the night breeze and fading into darkness in the distance, swallowed up by the night. By the edge of the road, an official-looking posted sign read:

ACCIDENT SITE.  
ANY DEBRIS FOUND SHOULD BE  
REPORTED TO THE NTSB

A series of phone numbers followed.

Clear breathed the crystal-fresh night air deep into her lungs, chewing on the inside of her mouth as she realized the immensity of the task they had set themselves. She knew that Alex would be here, somewhere. Given the circumstances, the site of the plane crash was the most logical place for him to be. She would have come here herself if she was in trouble, and she was confident that Alex thought the same way that she did. A feeling in her gut told her that he was nearby.

But where?

A plan was called for. Clear turned back to the car and gestured to Carter.

"He could be anywhere from here to a mile down the shore. You guys drive down there, start this way and we'll meet around the middle. It'll take half the time."

Without waiting for an answer, Clear slammed the door closed. After a moment, Carter and Billy drove off with a screech of tires and a thump of music. She could hear them bickering even as they did so.

Boys.

As the headlights of the car faded into the darkness, Clear transferred her gaze to the wooded pathway in front of her that led down to the beach, and breathed the sea air deeply into her lungs once again.

As she momentarily enjoyed the silence of the night, part of her—the tiny part she would never acknowledge, even to herself—gleefully informed her that time wasn't the issue here.

She wanted to find Alex by herself, and talk to him alone.

The more logical side of her told her that perhaps Alex would run if he saw her with Carter and Billy, and that she would have more chance of persuading him to come home with them if it was just her. A tiny voice in the back of her head begged to differ.

So, where to start? Clear closed her eyes, focusing in on the picture of Alex in her mind and trying to sense his presence. He wanted to pull this psychic shit? Maybe there was something in it, after all, Something stirred in the back of her brain, and after a moment she opened her eyes and resolutely started off along the pathway towards the beach, in the direction her instincts were pulling her.

That way.

Fifteen minutes later, she found him. Alex was sitting cross-legged in the sand, down near the water, a lone figure on the dark, deserted beach. A sea breeze played with his thin, gray cotton T-shirt and ruffled his hair as he stared out at the Atlantic, head in his hands, as though searching for an answer in its glittering black depths. Behind him, the waves were small and rhythmic, an eternal metronome beating out the heartbeats of the sea, measuring them off one by one.

Clear thought that she had never seen anyone look so alone.

Alex heard soft footsteps in the sand approach him from behind, and listened, noting them but saying nothing. He didn't need to turn

around to know who was behind him. Instead, he looked up into the sky, marshalling the spinning questions in his head into a single, coherent thought. The shoreline lights cast an orange haze on the stars, breaking through the mist. It was like looking into infinity.

"Are they up there?" he asked quietly.

Clear walked down the gentle slope towards him, barefoot in the sand. She paused behind him, listening, but didn't reply. Guilt still hung from her shoulders like a lead-weighted overcoat. She hadn't believed him. He hadn't even looked back at her yet. Was he still mad at her?

Alex gestured at the sky and went on. "Somehow... is 180 still in flight? Somewhere... are still safe?"

Clear glanced upwards at the stars, weighing her thoughts in her head, trying to think of a way to get through to him. What could she say to this guy that wouldn't sound like self-pitying bullshit?

It was a long time before she spoke. When she did, her voice was slow, measured, stripped of emotion.

"When I was a kid, like, six or seven... I used to worry so much about my parents dying. Like lying awake at night... just worrying." She gazed into the endless black waters, her smooth, young face utterly expressionless. She couldn't believe what she was about to tell him, and went on quickly, before she changed her mind.

"I loved them so much. I didn't want them to hurt, and what would happen to me? What would life be like? Every night, it seemed, I worried."

Clear looked out at the stars above her as she tried to gather her thoughts. The stars were beautiful, but their beauty was cold, uncaring. There was no warmth there, no life. Their beauty was a lie. The stars didn't give a shit about the tiny problems of men. They didn't give a shit about anything.

"Most kids do, I guess," said Alex quietly.

Clear shook her head, coming back to earth with a jolt. Long repressed memories swamped her in a tide, and she looked away from him, at the far-distant shoreline.

"Most kids never have it happen," she said bluntly.

That got Alex's attention. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him turn his head towards her for the first time, although he didn't move from his spot in the sand.

Clear ran her hands through her hair, thinking, and sat down in the soft, cool sand. Might as well tell him the real deal. What harm could it do? He had saved her life by telling her the truth. The least she could do was tell him her story.

Her eyes sought the safety of the rippling ocean as he twisted around to face her.

"When I was ten... my dad went into a 7-Eleven for a pack of cigarettes. I guess he heard somebody say, 'Don't turn around!' so on reflex, or thinkin' a friend was joking... he did. And a guy blew his head off."

Alex raised his eyebrows, staring at her in open shock. He'd just assumed that maybe her folks were a bit weird, to make her act the way she acted. He never knew she'd had something like that happen to her.

Clear shifted uncomfortably in the sand, her face expressionless. She had lived out this story so many times before, she was long beyond crying.

"Life became shit after that. My mom just couldn't deal anymore. She married this asshole, the kind of guy my real dad would cross the street to avoid." She paused, her eyes flicking briefly towards Alex. "He didn't really want a kid, and so, my mom didn't either anymore."

A thought struck her out of the blue, and Clear closer to Alex, kneeling down beside him, her seeking his. Alex glanced up at her, nervous, but unable to move away in case it seemed rude.

"That was the design?" Clear's voice was soft, but then it rose in sudden anger. "For my father, and my family? Then *fuck* Death."

The waves on the beach washed up and down. A seagull cried out overhead, gliding inland on the night breeze.

Clear swallowed, fighting to hold back tears. She went on, her voice trembling with emotion.

"I have thought a *lot* about that *somewhere*, Alex," she told him. "It *exists*, that place, where my dad is still safe... Where he had a full pack of cigarettes, and just kept driving." She looked to the horizon,

her tired face softening for a moment as she pictured it. "A place where me and my dad and my mom are still together... and have no idea about this second life, here." She felt her voice starting to break, but went on regardless. "A place where our friends are still in the sky... A place where everyone gets a second chance..."

She looked at Alex, her eyes blazing with an intensity he had never before seen on the face of another human being.

He swallowed, afraid and entranced at the same time.

Clear shook her head, moving in closer. "Alex, you can't give up."

Their faces were now only inches apart, and she could feel the heat of his body, grounding her like a semiconductor in a lightning storm. She reached out and touched his arm lightly, tenderly, her every word seemingly dragged from the pit of her soul.

"I haven't experienced too many second chances in my life. I haven't seen any, but because of all of this, I believe, and because of you... I *will* get a second chance." Clear took a deep breath. "And because of me, *you* will."

Alex looked at her, *really* looked at her, for the first time. An ocean breeze blew through her hair, making it dance around her soft, smooth face. She carried on looking at him in that desperate, intense way of hers, and Alex felt something inside his chest jump.

He thought that she was quite beautiful.

He remained motionless as her hand traveled up his arm, across his chest, and she gently cupped his face. "And *that* is the only way we can beat Death... by making something special out of life."

Alex's eyes welled with sudden tears, surprising Clear as much as they surprised him. Only then did she become emotional, biting back her own tears and willing her hand on his face to stop shaking. She gazed into Alex's eyes, which were lit with a soft, unholy happiness and a hard, holy unhappiness that she could see all twisted up together, his face damaged and understanding, and she realized she wore a tiny smile that mirrored his own.

A heartbeat later and his lips were on hers, kissing her passionately. As the black waves broke on the shoreline, he moved closer, desperate for human warmth. He ran his hands over her face, tangling them in her hair, grasping the back of her neck and pulling

her into him. He breathed deeply as he kissed her again, momentarily forgetting everything: the darkness and the isolation, the plane crash, the nightmare incidents of the past week. This was happening, this was real, and the whole entire universe could go to hell, because *this* was what mattered, this living, breathing human being in his arms, not some whacked-out prophecy of death and destruction.

Alex felt the winds of fate screaming over him as he lost himself in Clear's embrace, defying every twisted, fucked-up thing that the world could throw at them. As they sank back onto the sand, the look on Clear's moonlit face gave him something that, up until this point, he thought was lost entirely.

Hope.

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A few miles down the road, Billy and Carter strode briskly through the tangled undergrowth that carpeted the dark hillside, shouting Alex's name. Billy moved with languid ease through the trees, listening with half an ear to the muffled cursing and panting behind him as Carter thrashed his way through the thorny bushes, beating at them with a big stick to clear his way.

He paused in a small clearing and waited patiently for the jock to catch up with him, jiggling his leg nervously. Carter stumbled to a halt alongside him, wild-eyed, and waved a hand at the hillside in front of him that led down to the beach. It was a couple of moments before he got his breath back enough to be able to speak again.

"Fuck this. Let's go back."

Billy shook his head. "Clear said we had to find Alex."

"Screw Browning. Okay? He wants to act all high and mighty, swanning around with all his grand prophecies? Let him. I've got better things to do with my evening."

"But Clear said—"

"Screw Clear too. too. What does she know, anyway?" Carter rounded on Billy, wiping at his brow. His pants were torn, and he had a small sprig of ivy clinging to his muddied T-shirt. "I say we

head back to the car and wait for those two losers to find each other. Browning's into all that psychic shit? Let him do all the legwork."

Billy glanced at Carter, but the jock was already striding back up the hill towards the car.

"Hey!" he called. "We promised Clear. We gotta try!"

Carter ignored him, busy beating viciously at a clump of thorny plants in his path with his stick. His pant leg caught on some spiky brambles and he swore, flailing about wildly as he tried to disentangle himself.

"Fucking hill's trying to kill me!"

Billy glanced around him nervously at the dark landscape. The air somehow seemed too still, too close. The woods were silent, and only the faint wash and brush of the ocean disturbed the unnatural stillness. The stars shone down silently, casting an eerie glow on the jagged branches overhead. It was almost as though nature itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what happened next.

Billy shivered, drawing his Rangers jacket more tightly around himself. A faint roaring sound from above him drew his attention, and he looked up, craning his neck back to take in the night sky.

Above him, a blinking red light soared through the heavens—another aircraft rising steadily up into the air from JFK. Billy blinked, seeing again in his mind Flight 180 climbing into the sky on the same flight path before suddenly mushrooming into a ball of yellow fire. For a moment, he felt the same stab of cold fear as he realized that everyone in his class was dead, and that if it wasn't for Alex, he would have died too. At that moment, back in the terminal, his life had changed forever, and although he knew that there was no going back, he couldn't help but hope that one day he'd wake up and find out that all of this had been nothing but a bad dream.

At the same time he knew that this would never be the case. This was his lot from now on, and all he could do was try to make the most of it.

It was all that any of them could do.

Billy looked up at the soaring red blip of the aircraft, wondering who was on it, and wondering if they knew how lucky they were to be alive. He prayed that it would land safely at its destination. His

mother had got him started on this "praying" thing, after the plane crash. Billy wasn't particularly religious—certainly not as much as his folks were—but for some reason he suddenly found the idea of it strangely appealing. The thought that some greater force was actually listening to him, taking into account his tiny fears and hopes in relation to the grand plans of the universe, gave him a great deal of comfort.

Besides which, if Clear was right about Alex, he was going to need all the prayers he could get...

"Why are we even bothering to look for him? If he's so clued up on the future, he's gotta know we're coming, right?"

Billy turned around to see Carter glaring back down at him, his angular face thrown into sharp relief by the starlight. Billy shrugged, turning away into the shadows, not wanting Carter to see the fear on his face.

"Dude just blew up Lewton's house. We'll never find him if he don't wanna be found."

There was a pause. Carter thumped his stick into the ground a couple of times, but he didn't move away. "So you really think he did it? You think he killed Ms Lewton?"

"I don't know!" said Billy miserably. "I only know what I saw. I didn't think that Alex was capable of... doing what he did." Billy looked up at the aircraft again as it soared across the immense sky. "He's supposed to be able to predict shit? Then he can go right ahead and predict spending the rest of his life in jail, 'cos that's where he's gonna go when the cops catch up with him."

"Right." Carter took a step backwards, reflectively swinging the stick. Then he looked up sharply at Billy. "So you bel—"

"I never said I believed him," Billy said a little too quickly. He turned away from Carter and stared wretchedly out to sea, hands in his pockets, hunching his shoulders against the cold. "It's just..." He rocked back on his heels, thinking. "Everything's so messed up, you know? This time last month things were good, things were *right*. Everything made sense." Billy paused, shaking his head, gazing up at the winking lights of the plane. "Now we're out here in the asscrack of nowhere, freezing our balls off trying to find this psychic dude



from our class, who's gonna tell us which one of us is next to bite the big one?" He kicked moodily at the undergrowth. "Hello? Am I the only one who needs a little time-out here?"

"So you *do* believe him," said Carter flatly.

Billy blew out his breath in a sharp blast, considering. He looked at Carter sidelong. "Do you?"

Carter whacked at a couple more bushes with his stick, with what Billy thought was an unnecessary amount of force.

"I think he's full of shit," Carter muttered hotly. "No one can see the future. He got lucky once, that's all. Everyone freaks out about flying. Stands to reason that if a plane's gonna crash, at least one guy on board would've had some worries 'bout flying beforehand, right? It's just lucky for us that Browning's such a spaz that he can't keep his fuckin' mouth shut about his girly daydreams." Carter sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as Billy.

"So what about Ms Lewton?" prodded Billy.

Carter's stick paused mid-thrash, then resumed with even greater force, lopping the top off a patch of climbing ivy plants with a vicious flourish. Vegetation showered through the air like green rain. "What about Ms Lewton?"

"FBI dudes said Alex told them she was gonna be next."

Carter's stick flew from his grip and plunged down the side of the hill. He swore. "Please tell me you're kidding."

Billy shook his head. "Alex knew that Ms Lewton was going to die..."

"Because he was planning to kill her, right?"

"I don't know!" Billy rubbed his eyes with his fists, making blue lights dance across the landscape before him. "I wish I *did* know, then I could quit thinkin' about it all the goddamn freaking time. I just..." Billy shook his head, staring at the ground. He took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself.

"I keep seeing him running out of that house, all wigged out, then the place blows up and I figure hey, he did that to cover his tracks, to make it look like an accident. They found some gnarly shit in that house when the fire guys cleaned it out. There was blood everywhere..." Billy paused, his voice rising in fear. "How could he

even *do* something like that? He's, like, our age. How could he suddenly turn into such a psycho?"

Carter rubbed his arms moodily, trying to warm himself up. He seemed to shrink in size somehow, surrounded by the trees and the night. "So we'd believe him?" he said, aware even as he said it of how ridiculous he sounded.

Billy snorted. "Okay, so Alex butchers a full-grown woman in cold blood, then blows up her house, risking getting himself killed too, just so that we think he's got some kind of psychic powers?" Billy spread his hands in bewilderment. "Couldn't he just have, I dunno, shown us some cool card tricks or something? Or told us whether the Rangers were gonna win this season? At least then we woulda made some cash outta him..."

"He said he knew Terry was gonna die."

"What?" Billy stopped dead and stared at Carter.

"Clear told me. Alex told her that he saw like, this ghostly bus right before it hit her."

Billy glanced over at Carter. He was standing with his back to the moon, arms folded, his face in deep shadow.

"He could be just saying that, you know," Billy said quietly.

"Yeah, whatever." Carter's voice was hard. "So, he knew that Terry was going to die, but he didn't save her. He saved her from getting blown up on Flight 180, and then he lets her die a month later, right in front of him?" Carter swung around to face Billy. "Then screw him! And his little power trip! All he had to do was to stop her from walking out into that road, and then she would be here with me, right now. It would've taken him two seconds to save her life. *Two seconds.*"

Carter's voice began to waver, but he went on getting closer to Billy. He stopped just two feet from him, his dark eyes glittering furiously in the moonlight. "But he didn't, and now she's dead. God!" Carter swung around and kicked at a tree stump. "How could he do that to me? And to Terry? What did she ever do to him? She didn't deserve to die!"

His voice echoed down the hillside, raising strange echoes from the dark wood.

Billy backed away from Carter, wisely keeping his distance. "If you blame him for Terry's death, that's like saying you believe him."

Carter didn't reply. He turned away from Billy, staring off down the hill. After a minute he spoke, his voice thick with emotion.

"All I know is that if he could've saved Terry, I woulda believed him. Right now, I just hope for his sake that his folks took out life insurance on him, because if they didn't, they're gonna have a real bad day when I catch up with him. He doesn't have to be psychic to predict *that*."

Billy watched Carter as he turned and stomped off down the hill towards the car. Above him, the lights of the aircraft winked.

Casting a worried glance around at the gathering darkness, Billy took off down the hill after Carter. He only hoped that Clear found Alex before Carter did.

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A short while later, the engine of Carter's car screamed as they sped away from the beach, eating up mile after mile of rain-slicked asphalt as they rejoined the main highway. Carter drove silently, occasionally shooting guarded looks into the rearview mirror at Alex who sat in the back next to Clear. Carter hadn't spoken a word since they'd picked the two of them up, clearly uncomfortable with having Alex in his car.

Riding shotgun next to him, Billy drummed an anxious solo on his knee with his fingers, looking everywhere but at Alex. The atmosphere in the car was tense as everyone kept on the lookout for cops, and heavy with fear and hostility between the three boys.

Alex leaned forward in his seat as Carter turned onto the road that led back to town, worried. "Look, I can't go home. After Ms Lewton's, they're gonna be looking for me."

Clear put her hand protectively on his knee. "No, we're taking you to my dad's cabin in the woods. It's only a couple miles from my house."

Alex looked at her, relieved that they had some kind of a plan. His brain wasn't exactly firing on all cylinders, and it felt good to know

that at least someone in this car was taking charge of what was going on. Clear's hand was warm on his knee, and he drew strength from that, leaning in closer to her as the car rounded another bend. She smelled incredible, and his heart leapt as he studied the curve of her parted lips, thinking about how amazing it was that he'd never even noticed her before.

Maybe, just maybe, they would get through this.

Clear paused, quickly scanning the road, and then reached over to tap Carter on the shoulder. "Keep off the highways; they'll be lookin' for us."

Carter, however, wasn't listening. He glanced in the rearview mirror again, checking out Alex, his face torn with a dozen different thoughts he hadn't a clue how to express. Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he spoke out.

"Alright, Browning, you fucking warlock... Did you know about Ms Lewton, or what?"

Billy's gaze flew to Alex, then he averted his eyes and stared fixedly down at the car floor, waiting for his answer.

"Why do you think I was hiding?" Alex asked quietly.

Billy paled.

Carter's face was a picture of suspicion. "Billy told the FBI he saw you runnin' away from her house..."

"I was running because they blame me for everything," said Alex, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "They blame me for her, they blame me for Tod, they blame me for the fucking *plane crash*..."

Billy finally spoke up, his voice weak with fear. "Your shoe prints were in the blood. Your fingerprints were on the knife..."

"I already *told* you, Billy..." Alex's voice rose in frustration.

"I'm not talkin' about if you did it," snapped Carter. "Or if you knew she was dead." He paused, wrestling with himself, his grip tightening on the wheel. He couldn't believe he was about to ask this question. "Did you know she was going to be next... before she was?"

Clear looked at Alex, unable to help herself, her expression asking the same question. Alex felt her grip tighten on his knee.

He opened his mouth to snap off an angry retort, and paused. He looked around the car at the three anxious, frightened teenage faces. They were all so young. Little more than kids, caught up in a nightmare they couldn't wake up from. Only the strange maturity he saw in Clear's eyes set her apart from the others.

They were terrified, hanging on his every word.

Alex shifted in his seat, feeling a strange sense of responsibility for them all. He wanted to tell them that everything was okay, that this was all one, big freaky coincidence, and that they could go back home to their parents and live as before.

That they weren't all about to die...

But he couldn't.

Not with Clear looking at him like that, he couldn't.

Alex dropped his gaze, staring at the back of the seat in front of him. "Yeah," he said quietly, almost to himself. "I did. I knew."

The car filled with a deafening silence as the others considered this.

Carter's letter jacket rose and fell as he started panting shallowly, trying to stop himself from hyperventilating. "Out of all of us... who's next?" he asked weakly.

Alex eyed him, unsure about how to respond. Carter couldn't handle the truth, he knew that much.

"Please tell me I'm gonna get to see the Jets win the Super Bowl," Billy whined.

Carter silenced him with a glare. "It's me, right? That's why you're not saying." His voice wavered, and he hated himself for it. All his macho swagger had gone, and only raw, naked fear remained.

Alex didn't reply.

Clear glanced at him tensely, dry mouthed.

In the front seat, Billy looked out of the window, despondent. "I *knew* I shoul<sup>d</sup>a felt up Tammy in the pool that time..."

Carter turned to him, furious. "Hey, what you whinin' about? He said *I'm* next!"

"He didn't say nothing," snapped Clear, jumping to Alex's defense. "Just drive."

Carter did just that for several seconds, then thumped his hand on the wheel, his gaze flicking angrily to Alex in the mirror. "You have a *responsibility* to tell me."

"Do you think it's going to make it easier to know? Huh, Carter?" said Alex. His voice was low, but it had a cutting edge to it that seemed to strike sparks in the air. He spoke to Carter, but addressed everyone in the car as he leaned forward between the seats, the red taillight from the car ahead lighting up his face. "It's not. It's just gonna make it fuckin' harder."

Carter's nostrils flared in contempt as he glared at Alex in the rearview mirror. "Hey, you get off havin' control over me? You let *me* choose how to deal with it."

"It doesn't matter who's next!" shouted Alex, "Because we're all on the same list! All of us!"

He said it without even thinking, and then instantly regretted it as the air in the car froze. A tomb like silence descended, heavy with the sound of three panicked young minds whirring at full speed.

"Oh, fuck... Really?" squeaked Carter, speaking for all of them.

Alex met Clear's horrified gaze. She quickly looked away, but not before he saw the damage he'd just done to her. To all of them.

Dammit!

In the front seat, Carter's expression became fixed. Emotions fought for space on his pale, arrogant face, running quickly through shock, horror, denial and anger before irrational bravado finally won through. Hunkering down in his seat, he made a snap decision. The sick fear on his face cleared away to be replaced by an icy calm. He lifted his head, his chin jutting defiantly.

"Then why bother? What's the fuckin' point, right?" He glanced into the rearview mirror, checking out Alex's reaction. "Terry and me will be back together on the other side, so why wait any longer?"

Carter slammed his foot down on the gas. They were all thrown backwards as the car shot forward, accelerating into the night. Carter bore down on the wheel, swerving the car into the fast lane.

"Carter, what are you doing?" asked Alex, his voice dangerously calm.

The muscle car roared past a red stop sign, bouncing them all around as it cleared a dip in the intersection.

Inside the car, everyone except Carter tensed.

"Carter, slow down," ground out Alex.

Carter ignored him.

"Slow down!" Alex yelled, losing his temper.

"Hey, fuck you!" Carter clenched his jaw and hit the accelerator again. The muscle car sucked fuel and Carter yanked on the wheel, causing the back end of the car to slide ninety degrees as he took a corner at sixty miles per hour.

"Knock it off!" shouted Clear, clinging to the upholstery as the car righted itself.

"Why! May as well go out under my own free will, right?"

"Not with us in the fuckin' car!" yelled Billy.

The car gunned it through another stop sign. Everyone held on as the car bounced through the next dip. Horns blared all around them and cars slid away wildly as their drivers stood on the brakes, shouting obscenities through the windows.

"Jesus! Carter, no!"

"Oh my God!"

"Carter, stop the car!"

Carter glared at them defiantly. "Hey, what's your fuckin' worry if it ain't your time? I could get nailed runnin' this red light and you all wouldn't get shit, right? It's only me!"

"It doesn't work that way Carter!" yelled Alex. He reached quickly down to put his seatbelt on, but saw to his horror that it was broken. He fingered the frayed, torn ends with a frown on his face. He was sure that the belt hadn't been like that when he'd got into the car.

A red light loomed out of the darkness in front of them. A white station wagon approached the intersection to their right, seeing a green light. Carter's car tore towards it and then past it, just missing being T-boned in the intersection as the other car hit the brakes to avoid him, fishtailing out of control. Seconds later, a beat-up Corvette coming from the other direction, spun out as its driver braked wildly to miss the car full of crazy teenagers, stopping crossways in its lane, forcing oncoming cars to honk and skid around

it. Water sprayed as the back wheels of the muscle car skidded from side to side on the wet road, and then, finding a dry spot, the tires found their grip.

The car hurtled onwards.

"And I fuckin' HATED FRENCH CLASS!" sobbed Billy, his face pressed up against the window by force.

Carter drove on, accelerating up a straight stretch of road lined with parked cars.

Alex reached down to grab hold of his seatbelt, struck by a sudden urgent need to tie the broken ends together, for what little protection that would give him... and suddenly, the belt was whole again. Not a break in sight.

He fumbled with it, confused.

Too freaked out by the streets pin-wheeling around the car to give it much thought, Alex jammed it on, and then grabbed the headrest in front of him as Carter performed another sickening ninety-degree turn around a corner at top speed. He narrowly missed a pizza delivery van. The wheels on the right hand side of the car left the road as the car went round the corner on two wheels, then slammed back down again, sparks shooting from the back wheel arches as the car bottomed out, bouncing heavily on its ancient suspension.

Clear leaned forward, yelling over the front seat. "Get control of yourself!" she shouted in Carter's ear.

"That's what I'm doin'!" Carter gave the car another jolt of gas, his wide-eyed gaze fixed through the front windshield.

"I know what you're doing! It's alright to be scared, Carter!"

"I'm not afraid! Alright?" Carter yelled. "I decide when it's time! I control my life! I control my death!"

"You don't have to prove to us how big your balls are. Not now... Ow!"

As Billy spoke, he tried to grab the wheel, and broke off as Carter punched him hard in the face. He grabbed his nose as blood started to flow, cursing Carter under his breath.

The muscle car barreled through the intersection and made a left turn, its rear wheels swinging out wildly. Traffic was thankfully light at this hour, but as they skidded across the road an approaching semi



truck blared its horn, heading straight towards them. Carter took his hands off the wheel and defiantly raised them in the air, like a child on a roller coaster.

"Jesus Christ! Carter, put your hands back on the fucking wheel!" yelled Alex.

"Stop the car!"

"Let us out!"

Alex, Clear and Billy screamed in unison as the turning semi honked, its sodium lights blasting through the front windshield like the light at the end of the tunnel. Its driver saw the muscle car heading towards it at breakneck speed and hauled on the wheel, skipping the turn and pulling the tanker's cab around in a tight bank, giving the speeding car room to pass. Tires squealed as Carter's car whizzed past the semi's front bumper with inches to spare, nearly clipping the rear end of a turning car. Both drivers blared their horns furiously.

"Woohooo!"

Elated rather than scared by his near-miss, Carter hooked his elbow on the window and his right arm around the front seat, driving with no hands. The wheel juddered back and forth in front of him and the car started drifting to the left, crossing the lane line. Everyone in the car yelled at him. He ignored them.

"I am... so close to puking right now, you don't even wanna know," Billy said.

Alex saw that there was no reasoning with Carter, and glanced out of the side window, checking for cops. He then jumped back as the shadow of some large, hulking vehicle loomed out of the mist at him. It looked almost like the front of a goods train carriage, shooting towards him across the road. Alex gave a *yip* of fright, but the car was traveling so rapidly that when he looked back again, the hulking apparition had gone.

Alex wiped his brow. What the hell was that? He must finally be going loco. There was no way a goods train could be on the road...

His gaze became fixed as he suddenly thought of the ghostly reflection of the bus he had seen earlier, just minutes before it hit

Terry. His mind revved up into full crisis mode. Could this be some kind of sign, too?

Seeing that Alex was starting to panic, Clear sat forward in her seat in an attempt to take control of the situation. Her voice was firm, filled with a strength that was way beyond her years.

"We're afraid, too, Carter, but we're not going to quit. Maybe you are. You act like you're not afraid, but you are!"

Carter eyed Clear in the rearview mirror, but said nothing.

"So, stop what you're doing and stop this fucking car!"

Carter's mouth tightened into a thin hard line of defiance.

"Dammit Carter, I want you to stop this car right now!"

To Clear's infinite relief, Carter looked around him, then applied the brake with a petulant sigh, downshifting, and dropping the speed from sixty to thirty. A few moments later, the car coasted to a halt at the bottom of a steep hill.

In the back seat, Alex looked at Clear greatfully.

Close one.

And red blur passed behind them out of the back windshield. Alex glanced behind him, his eyes widened in alarm. A second red blur dropped into place in front of the car, and they all gasped.

It was a railway crossing arm.

Carter had just stopped the car in the middle of a railway line.

And the train was heading right towards them.

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The *CLANG-CLANG-CLANG* of the railroad crossing alarm shattered the night air. Red lights flashed over them, bathing the car and its passengers in a sickly glow.

Slowly, the three teens turned to stare at Carter, who flashed them a smug smile as if to say, "Ha! That's why I stopped."

"Move it." Alex's voice was quiet with an undertone of deep menace.

In reply, Carter turned off the engine with a click, and then sat back in his seat and folded his arms defiantly. He had no intention of moving.

"Move the fucking car!"

Carter just smiled an annoying smile.

Alex's heart began hammering. Carter wasn't going to move. That meant that they had to. But the car was a two-door. There was no way he and Clear could get out, unless Carter and Billy let them out.

"Billy, hey, open the door," said Alex. His voice was still worryingly calm.

Clear was less discreet. "Open the fucking door!" she yelled, right in Billy's face.

Scared to death, Billy fumbled numbly with the car door handle. The lights around him seemed to be getting brighter. From the front passenger seat, he looked up, and froze. His jaw dropped open in sheer horror. Bright lights flashed through the trees to their right, broadside to the car. A black shape crawled into view, and white-hot terror poured down Billy's spine as he realized what it was.

A locomotive was approaching.

Fast.

The inside of the car exploded into chaos. Alex and Clear started thumping on the seat in front of them, trying to shoulder it aside with brute force as Billy was still in it.

"Can't you open the door?" Clear spat at Billy.

"Easy, Billy. Just open it." Alex soothed, shooting a glance at the frantic Clear.

Chest heaving in panic, Billy collected himself and reached a shaking hand towards the door handle, somehow managing to pop it open. He peered fearfully out. Directly opposite him, out of the window, the nose of the train appeared around the blind bend.

That did it. Gibbering in fear, Billy threw open the door and poured himself out of the car in a quivering funk. Clear and Alex shoved aside the front seat and leapt out behind him.

Carter, remained in the driver's seat. He stared straight ahead, one arm casually lolling out of the window, one hand on the wheel, as though listening to the radio while stuck in traffic.

A couple hundred yards away, the warning whistle blew on the train three times in quick succession, as the driver spotted his worst nightmare up ahead—a car stalled across the tracks. Clear and Billy

leapt away from the car, backing up the road. Alex hung back, leaning in through the open door, in a last-ditch attempt to reason with the stubborn jock.

"Carter, listen to me. Don't do this!"

In reply, Carter gave him a bored look, then reached out and deliberately tipped the passenger seat back down, sealing himself inside the car. He stared at Alex pointedly, waiting for him to leave.

"Goddamn it! Get out of the *fucking* car!" Clear yelled, beside herself with fury.

"Hey, listen to me. This isn't the way!" yelled Alex. "It's not the way; get out of the car! Come on!"

Billy danced up and down on the spot, pointing towards the approaching locomotive. "It's coming! It's coming!"

Arms smugly crossed, Carter remained in the front seat. Out of the window, the night blossomed with light as the locomotive rounded a curve in the tracks and started heading down the long, straight line towards them, blue steam billowing from its front funnel. As the black-leather interior filled with light from the headlight of the oncoming train, Carter turned and looked up at Alex, his impassive expression breaking into a smartass smile, pleased that he'd shown how brave he truly was. Now, *Alex* was the one who was freaking out and terrified, while he was still cool and collected.

Finally, he had won.

Nodding crisply to himself, Carter arched an eyebrow at Alex and gave him a beam of cocky defiance. "It ain't my time," he announced. Coolly, he turned back to the ignition, grabbed the key, and turned it over to start the engine.

*Whirrr... Clunk.*

Carter stared at the ignition, his eyes flaring with sudden tension. Trying to appear nonchalant, he turned the key again, then again and again.

*Whirrrrrrr... Clunk.*

*Whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrr... Clunk.*

Nothing.

The engine was dead.

The confident smile fell from Carter's face as he turned his startled, saucer-eyed gaze out of the window and up the track.

The locomotive was perhaps fifteen seconds away.

Carter's face turned gray.

Alex ran towards Carter, frantic, as the train screamed towards them. "Get out! Get out of the fuckin' car!"

Carter suddenly realized that this was real. He had stalled his car on a train track, and now he was about to get pulverized by three hundred tons of speeding locomotive.

"Oh, shit!"

Carter's system went into overdrive. His heart started pounding with a sudden overload of adrenaline.

*He had to get out of the car!*

Sweating, he reached down with cold, trembling fingers and pulled at his seatbelt, fumbling for the buckle. He pressed the red release button.

*Clack.*

*Clack.*

*CLACKCLACKCLACKCLACK...*

The restraint button was stuck!

He tugged at his belt in a panicked, useless frenzy.

"Oh, fuck!"

Carter caught a glimpse of something flying towards him in the mirror, as though a shadow had detached itself from the pit of darkness in the surrounding woods and was descending on the car. Startled, he jerked his head up, staring behind him, but there was nothing there except the locomotive, which seemed to have gotten very big all of a sudden. It thundered towards the car at full power, now only fifty feet away from a final, fatal collision. Its emergency whistles blew again and again, shrieking like the harpies of doom.

Fuck the seatbelt. Carter was getting out of the car. His numb fingers found the door handle and he yanked it as hard as he could. In his haste he jerked it too quickly and accidentally deployed the automatic lock. The time-warped machinery froze up with a *clunk*.

And now, the door was jammed.

Carter pulled at the handle... Tugged at the seatbelt... Both were hopelessly, irretrievably stuck. He was trapped in the car, and the train was nearly upon him. Horrified, he whipped his head around towards the others.

"I can't get out!" he screamed. Beneath the car, the wooden boards of the line began to pound up and down with the train's approach. The other three survivors looked at one another, aghast.

"Man, he really is next!" stammered Billy.

Sizing up the situation in a flash, Alex ran back to the car and pelted around towards the driver's door, which was directly in the path of the train. Reaching in through the wound-down window, he desperately tried to free Carter's seatbelt, digging his fingers under the belt and pulling hard so could slacken it enough for Carter to wriggle out from under it. The more he pulled, the tighter it seemed to get, as the belt's pressure sensitive locking mechanism seized up.

On the muddy bank of grass, Clear and Billy did a frantic dance of fearful urgency.

Come on... Come on...

The train was less than thirty feet away, roaring towards the car in a cloud of smoke. The horn sounded again and again, and sparks flew from the wheels as the driver deployed the emergency brakes, realizing that the kids were not going to move the car in time.

*SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!* The train's whistle sounded right on top of them. Carter looked up into the iron face of the approaching locomotive, feeling more alone than he had ever felt in his entire life. The great light on the front of the train bored into his brain, the rail plow looking like bared teeth on a death-skull, grinning as though mocking his mortality.

Twenty feet...

Giving up on the seatbelt, Alex grabbed Carter under the arms and strained with all his might to pull the jock out of the driver's window.

Seconds away, the train whistle screamed.

Ten feet...

"Alex!" yelled Clear. "Get out of there!"

Alex pulled with every ounce of strength in his seventeen year-old body. Blinded by the headlights of the train, he gritted his teeth and

put everything he had into one last, Herculean effort. He couldn't see Carter; he couldn't see the train; he couldn't hear his own screaming as he strained with every fiber of his being. It occurred to him that he was probably about to die, but that didn't matter. He wasn't letting yet another survivor die... Not on his watch!

Five feet...

There was a sudden slackening in the tension of Carter's body, and then the jock came free of the seatbelt and flew through the driver's side window like a cork coming out of a bottle. The two boys started to fall backwards, Carter clutched safely in Alex's arms.

Just as Carter's legs cleared the window, an immense explosion of noise and air hit them in a blast as the train tore through the front end of the car. The heavy muscle car was instantly demolished, folding around the plow like cheap tin foil, and flying off up the track as the train shunted it along. Glass and metal erupted in a blaze of white-hot sparks as the car was dragged along the track, and fire billowed as the gas tank exploded, sending the car's chassis flying into the air with a thunderous crash.

Clear and Billy flung themselves down in the dirt, shielding their faces and covering their ears against the terrifying sound. Behind them, the car was ground to a tangled pulp of metal, transformed from high-powered automobile to abstract sculpture in one short second. Alex and Carter fell back onto the bank, scrambling away from the rail as the locomotive pounded past just feet away from them. Debris crunched beneath the locomotive as the great iron wheels thundered and clacked along the train tracks.

Then steel shrieked as the traumatized remains of the car crashed back onto the track and were pulverized once more into even smaller pieces, left in a heap thirty feet away from the cowering teens. The long locomotive continued to thunder past, carriage after carriage, whipping by in a blur.

Clear ran over to the two fallen boys and threw herself into Alex's arms, holding him tight and burying her face in his chest. Carter lay on the road nearby, hyperventilating and near to tears.

"I saw it! I saw the belt!" yelled Alex above the howl of the passing train.

Clear turned her head and fixed Carter with an unflinching stare, her hair whipping around in the wind. "Scared now?" she yelled.

Carter looked incredulously at the piece of seatbelt still wrapped around his waist. "It broke!" he gasped. He was so shocked to be alive that he didn't even register the urine stains darkening the crotch of his expensive khaki pants.

"No one's that strong!" Billy stared at Alex in awe.

"Bullshit," snapped Clear. "He saved your life... again!"

A hundred yards away, the locomotive continued to brake as the driver fought to slow the train enough to stop it so he could check for survivors. Underneath the train, the great wheels continued to spin, kicking around chunks of twisted metal from Carter's demolished car. Most of the car had been knocked off the tracks by the plow, but a few pieces of smaller debris remained. Blue sparks flew as a broken two-foot long shard of the car's wheel arch bounced along the tracks, kicked about by the train wheels.

"That's right!" yelled Billy, his face slackening in realization. He sprang to his feet and began backing away from the others, panting. The red light from the signal flickered across his features. "You're next, Carter! I'm staying the fuck away from you!"

Carter stared up at him, sweating, for once in his life too terrorized to defend himself.

"Shut up, Billy!" yelled Clear, clinging to Alex, her relief turning to anger. "We don't need this shit right now!"

Billy continued backing away, an expression of horror on his face as behind him, the carriages of the locomotive continued to thunder past.

"I don't need it *ever*!"

He stared at Clear and Alex from behind a fog of full-blown hysteria, feeling his mind start to unravel like a great curled spring. "What are you doing? Get away from him! He's next! He's next!"

A loud rattling sound came from the train tracks behind him as debris crunched beneath the wheels. The two-foot section of the car's wheel arch bounced directly on the track. With great power and force, one of the heavy train wheels ran over it, catapulting it up into the tread of the wheel, where it spun round and round...



"Hey, fuck you, Billy! I'm not dead!" Carter yelled, still cowering on the ground.

Billy continued to back away. "You will be! You're dead! You're dead!"

Behind him, the piece of metal shot out from beneath the train, flung out by the wheel with the force of a guided missile...

"AND YOU AIN'T TAKIN' ME WITH YOU!" Billy yelled at the top of his lungs.

*FWOOP!* The piece of metal shot through the air, slicing off Billy's head in one clean stroke.

The train roared past and then vanished around a bend with a rattle and a spray of sparks. Billy's decapitated body wobbled on its feet for a moment. Then it pitched to the ground and lay still.

Still sprawled on the ground, the teenagers lay frozen in a horrified little heap.

"Oh God! No!"

"Oh shit! Jesus Christ!"

Carter scrambled away from the body and tried to get to his feet to run, but his legs turned to jelly and gave out on him, sending him sprawling, once again, into the dirt. Clear covered her mouth with her hand as she stared at Billy's severed head lying in the gully. It seemed to be staring at her accusingly. The metal shard had sliced the head neatly in two from the corners of his mouth to the base of the spine, and Clear noticed with a wave of revulsion that Billy's lower jaw was missing.

Finally, something had stopped him talking.

Sickened, she turned away.

For a strangled beat, there was silence... until, in the distance, the sound of sirens filled the air, approaching fast. As Alex stood up and Carter managed to rise on wobbly legs, none of them could rip their eyes away from Billy's body.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" whimpered Carter.

Alex finally came back to life, stirring from his shocked silence. He whirled to face Carter.

"You should have been next! After Lewton, you should've been next. That's the pattern. That's the design." Alex stared at Carter as

though looking at a ghost. "You should be fucking *dead*!"

Carter scrambled away from Alex. "You're the fuckin' devil!" he moaned.

Alex came after him, his eyes alight with excitement as he worked things through in his head. "I saw the seatbelt! I knew it would rip! That's how I saved him. I *intervened*. Just like the plane, and just like the explosion. I saw it!" Alex looked at Carter as if experiencing an intense epiphany. "*That's* the design!"

"The police are coming," sobbed Clear, staring down the road. In the distance, flashing red and blue lights pierced the heavy darkness.

Alex ignored her, elated by the thrill of his discovery. "Fuck! I saved him! And because I saved him, it skipped Carter and went to the next person in the path of the explosion—Billy." He pointed dramatically down at the headless corpse as though this was a murder mystery game and he was reeling off the suspects. Clear wondered if he realized that somebody had just died.

Was this all just a game to him?

"I have to *see* it," Alex was gabbling. "And if I see it, I intervene, and if I intervene, I cheat the design!" He clapped his hands together delightedly, as though he had just solved all their problems.

"Intervene? What, are you God now?" Carter shouted, still backing away.

Alex stopped, his eyes suddenly snapping back into focus. He took a step towards Carter, the look of profound knowledge on his face chilling. "Gods aren't afraid to die!" he proclaimed. "Gods don't die! We do! You know?"

Watching Alex rant like that made Clear choke back a sob, suddenly overcome with emotion. She was bone weary, and felt like she hadn't slept or eaten in a month. Screw the gods. Billy was dead and the police were coming. If they caught Alex here, with the still cooling body of Billy at his feet, he would never see the light of day again, no matter what she or Carter said to defend him. She had to take control now, or they would all be lost.

She grabbed Alex and shook him hard, trying to compartmentalize her emotions. There would be time enough for hysterics later. She took a deep breath, willing her voice not to shake.

"You're losin' it, okay? The police will be here soon. We have to get you back to my cabin. You can hide there. Get your head together."

Alex considered this, his mind racing. A sudden realization hit him, and he turned back to Clear, sobering up. He took hold of her shoulders and looked gently into her eyes. There was something he had to tell her, and it couldn't wait any longer. There was no more hiding it, not now.

"After Billy... I'm next, he told her. "I'm next."

Clear felt the world sliding away from her. *So that was it.* There really was no hope.

"Then me," she said. It was a statement, not a question. Her voice was flat, defeated. She felt tears start to sting her eyes and brushed them away angrily. Fuck that.

Alex took her in his arms, holding her, cupping her face as it crumpled in anguish. "Hey, hey, hey, listen! I'm not gonna let that happen, okay? Listen to m—"

"Hey! Why don't you two just get the fuck out of here, okay?"

They both turned to look at Carter, surprised. The jock stared first at Clear, then at Alex, and then wordlessly jerked his head towards the wood, as though this was as much as he would do to admit that he believed Alex.

In the distance, the train whistle blew eerily, as if Death was punctuating the moment.

Getting his drift immediately, Clear nodded once, curtly, in thanks.

Then she took Alex by the hand and ran off with him into the darkness.

Carter stood by the wreck of his car, staring down at the decapitated body of Billy lying in the gutter, and waited for the police to arrive.

# TEN

The autumn wind rustled the dying leaves on the trees that surrounded the dilapidated cabin huddled in the woods beside the lake. The cabin was old, and obviously hadn't been used for years. The windows of the cabin were boarded, the dusty glass covered in spiderwebs. The front steps were worn and the entire building was badly in need of repair. White paint flaked off in a thousand tiny curls, giving the cabin an eerie, ghostly look as it huddled beneath the dark trees. Overhead, the sky was the color of bruised flesh, run through with streaks of red from the fast decaying sunset.

In the far distance, lightning flickered a warning.

Inside the cabin, Alex walked slowly around the room with a rapidly diminishing roll of metal duct tape in his hand. He fed it out behind him as he walked, hand over hand, winding the long, snaking strip around lamps and across shelves, sticking it to anything and everything that could fall. He then secured the ends safely around the door joists.

The roll finally ran out, and Alex applied a final piece of tape to the corner of a table, covering the sharp edges, and then stood back and surveyed his handiwork, squinting at it critically through bleary eyes. The inside of the cabin was already festooned with garland-like strands of the silver tape, glinting in the low light. Ropes crisscrossed the walls like giant spiderwebs, holding the doors and shutters closed. Even though it was sunny outside, all the shades were pulled. The room sat brooding in dark shadows, broken only by the occasional shaft of light coming in through the splintery wooden shutters. A snatch of birdsong drifted in through the broken window, but Alex barely even heard it.

Right now, all of his attention was focused on one thing.

Staying alive...

Alex carefully pushed a cork over a small nail that protruded from the wall, being careful not to cut himself. The duct tape was part of his master plan for accident proofing the place. He had picked this room as being the safest in the house, but still, hidden dangers

abounded. Clear had told him that this room used to be hers when she was younger, and he could well believe it. Old dolls and battered paperbacks jostled for space with half-finished artwork and old, rusted camping supplies. They were strewn about haphazardly as though someone had once made a half-hearted attempt at packing and just abandoned everything right where it stood. The cabin in general was packed so full of clutter that it would've taken them weeks to move everything out and get it safely stored... Weeks that they couldn't afford to risk right now. If Alex was going to be the next one to die, then he sure as hell wasn't venturing out into the open to compare prices on removal firms.

Alex snorted humorlessly at the thought, then grabbed a fresh roll of tape and stuck down a few more loose objects. He glanced around the cabin, feeling pleased with himself. Nothing short of a major earthquake would cause anything in this room to fall on him. Accident-proofing the room had taken up most of his time since his arrival at the cabin ten days ago, and it helped take his mind off the events of the last few months, if only for a short while.

His memories were the last things Alex wanted to be alone with right now.

Taking a break from his endeavors, Alex stood and gazed thoughtfully at the large bag of groceries sitting on the kitchen table. Clear had been to the store that morning and had brought him fresh supplies with what meager money they had been able to scrape together between the two of them. She hadn't been able to go to either of their parents for money, as that would've aroused suspicions that would've put an abrupt end to their little sojourn in the woods.

His folks were going nuts looking for him. If they even suspected that Clear knew where he was, she would've been dragged in immediately for questioning, and then he would've had to venture out to get his own food, possibly with fatal results.

At the thought of food, Alex's stomach rumbled.

Fine, he would eat. The rest of the cabin could wait.

Stretching out his hand, Alex carefully picked up an old-fashioned Coleman lantern, and then sat it atop an empty can placed in a large

metal tub filled with water, which formed an improvised fire protection moat. He carefully lit the lantern with a small wooden safety match and turned the flame up as high as he dared, making excited shadows leap around the room. There was no electricity in the cabin, and Alex liked it better that way. It was one less thing to worry about.

He found his way to a chair in the center of the room, which was set away from everything except a nearby table holding a fire extinguisher and a first aid kit; both at less than arm's reach. He wanted to be prepared for every eventuality. In that chair, he was invincible. Nothing could touch him.

Unless, of course, the roof caved in on his head, or the ground subsided under him, or...

Okay, that was it. No more thinking!

As he sat down with a grimace, Alex caught sight of himself in the dented steel mirror fixed to the opposite wall. It was a scary sight, and he made a wry face at himself. In the dim glow of the lantern, he looked like an anxious zombie. Dark circles ringed his eyes from lack of sleep. He was thin from lack of food. Pale, from lack of sunlight. Unshaven and unkempt, his face was dusted with a week and a half's worth of grime, and smeared with dirt from his exertions in the dusty cabin. His hair stuck up in half a dozen random directions, and he still had dried blood smeared at his temples.

Better that than dead.

He wouldn't be like this forever, he knew. He just had to have this time by himself to think; to plan ahead; to figure out how to beat this thing, once and for all. If that meant spending the next six months in this cabin, then so be it.

Right now, it wasn't like he had any other choice.

Wiping his hands on his sweat-stained, grimy gray T-shirt, Alex picked up a pair of thick leather workman's gloves and fumbled them onto his hands before reaching back into the bag, fishing around for food. He withdrew a small can, and with great caution, worked the fingers of the musty-smelling gloves beneath the tab and pulled.

The lid came off to reveal his dinner: chicken spread.

He peered into the can, regarding the white, congealed, pulverized meat product with a look of deep suspicion. He imagined razor blades in there, dropped in by disgruntled meat-packing employees a misguided, yet deadly revenge attack. Or else the can was contaminated, if not by salmonella then by chicken bone splinters, ready to leap out at him and stick in his throat, blocking his windpipe and choking him to death before he could so much as call for help.

So this is what paranoia felt like, thought Alex. Interesting.

Alex stopped all his thoughts dead in their tracks. He couldn't avoid eating, and this was probably the safest food he could get. He reminded himself what Clear had said to him when he'd complained—it was either this or baby food, and no way was he eating baby food. Despite everything, he still had some pride left.

Careful not to cut himself on the sharp metal edges, he dropped the lid of the chicken spread into the brown paper bag filled with garbage at his feet. Then he removed his gloves, laying them across the knee of his dirty, grass stained pants. A spoon came out of the bag next; plastic, of course. Dipping the spoon into the spread, Alex began to eat, chewing methodically with grave concentration, his gaze fixed on the far wall as he waited for disaster to strike. This was by far the most dangerous part of his day, but he was ready for anything. He winced as a morsel of gristle crunched between his back teeth, then, steadying himself, prepared to swallow.

The food went down, and stayed down.

Alex paused, licking his lips, scarcely noticing the foul taste.

He was alright.

Nodding to himself, Alex scooped up some more of the white processed slop, and repeated the whole process again.

As he sat there eating, thunder rumbled in the distance, warning of an approaching storm. A stiff breeze kicked up and blew under the inch-high gap beneath the door, carrying with it curled and shriveled autumn leaves which skittered across the floor towards Alex.

Alex felt the breeze flap his pant legs and froze, spoon poised over the can. He wound his eyes around in the direction of the breeze, obsessively cautious, then set the can of chicken down and turned towards the door. At his feet, the brown paper bag full of trash

rustled in the breeze, then fell over before he could stop it. Garbage spread itself liberally onto the floor, and an empty can fell out and rolled across the room. Alex tensed, his eyes flying ahead of the can, anticipating its path. His mind worked quickly, juggling all the variables. It was just a can, but still, in the hands of fate, it could be deadly.

As Alex watched from the safety of his chair, the can rumbled across the floor and gently struck the end of a fishing pole that was propped up in the corner. The pole teetered and then gave way to gravity and fell over with a clatter. The line played out as it fell, and the fishing hook caught on the latch of a closet door which opened with a *click*.

The door began to swing.

Fear shot like an electrical charge through Alex. He hadn't even begun safe-proofing the closets yet, and he had no idea what was in there. Behind the door, there was a loud crash as something fell off a shelf. Automatically, Alex leapt out of his chair, crossed the room in two giant strides, and slammed both hands on the door, banging it shut.

Three inches of glinting metal stabbed through the door between his hands, stopping just an inch short of his face.

Alex's heart nearly imploded in his chest. Slowly and with extreme caution, he removed his hands from the door and backed away, his eyes fixed on the metal dagger that had nearly kebabbed his brain.

When he was a safe distance away and nothing further had happened to him, he let out his breath in a rush and cracked a grim half smile, pleased that he had stopped Death in its tracks. He removed the hook from the door and placed the pole carefully on the floor, away from anything it might touch or cause to fall. Then, steeling himself for anything, he carefully opened the closet door and peeked around it.

The closet was a mess. Rusty camping equipment was stowed side by side with bits of old farm machinery and sporting gear. An old, six-inch long fish-scaling knife was trapped between a heavy box that had fallen off the shelf and the door, embedded in the rotten door panel.



And nearly in my head, thought Alex grimly.

He shivered at the thought.

Removing the knife with infinite care, he put it away in what appeared to be a safe place. Alex's questing eyes then turned back towards the closet. Something glinted on the floor, and he stretched out a hand to pick it up. It was an ancient barbed fishing hook. A half-open tackle box had spilled rusted old Treble and Aberdeen fishing hooks all over the floor. Alex bent down to examine them, carefully picking one up and holding it up to the light to examine it.

"Rusted. Tetanus. Nice touch," he told the empty air as if congratulating an opponent on a clever chess move. He looked around the cabin, nodding thoughtfully to himself.

"I overlooked it. You tried to capitalize, but I caught you, you *fuck*."

Throwing the rusty fishing hook back inside the closet, he rose to his full height, glaring around. "I can beat you. Not forever, but I got this cabin rigged to beat you now!"

If anyone had looked in through the cabin window, they would've seen a madman, standing there in his dirty, sweaty clothes, ranting at empty air. A part of Alex knew this, and wanted nothing more than to stop this craziness, go home, have a shower, and crawl into his nice, soft comfy bed. When he woke up all of this would be over. But a bigger part of him knew that the moment he stepped out the cabin door, he would be dead.

As Alex backed away from the closet toward his safe chair again, he thought of all the crazies he used to see downtown, homeless and barefoot, wandering the streets in rags, howling at fate and the universe to quit fucking around and come get them already.

For one chilling moment, the thought crossed Alex's mind that they might not be so crazy after all.

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On the other side of town, Clear stood by the window in her bedroom, peering out at the gathering dusk. Careful not to be seen,

she pulled aside the lace curtain and gazed down to the end of her gravel driveway.

They were still there.

Parked beside the road at the end of her drive, the unmarked FBI sedan maintained a watchful surveillance over her house, waiting to see if she went anywhere, or if Alex stopped by. Lightning flickered silently as a storm rose in the air, bathing the car in a pale glow. Even in the dim light, she could clearly see the two FBI agents sitting inside, peering into her front window through binoculars. They had been there every evening since Alex had disappeared, parked out in her drive in that big gray dorkmobile of theirs. They showed no sign of losing interest anytime soon.

Pair of jackasses.

She watched them watching her, shaking her head as Agent Schreck yawned hugely and reached onto the dash for yet another cup of coffee. That had to be the most boring job in the world, and she didn't know why they were even bothering. Did they really think that Alex was going to come skipping along the road towards her house, holding out his wrists for them to handcuff?

If they did, then they were stupider than they looked.

Approaching thunder rumbled as Clear stepped away from the window, gazing thoughtfully around her room to try to distract herself from worrying about Alex. Her bedroom was small but had a high ceiling; the walls were stacked high with boxes containing scrap materials for her artwork that she hadn't gotten around to sorting yet. Clear had hung a makeshift lampshade of wire and pink tissue paper over the only source of light in her room—a single, bare bulb stuck on the end of a standing lamp base. It gave the room a friendly, warm glow.

Here and there, she had made at least some attempt at cleaning up, but seeing as her mother was never in these days, she didn't much see the point. The heaps of clothes dumped over every available surface were a testimony to her very definite lack of willpower when it came to housework. A battered old MP3 player sat on the windowsill, surrounded by piles of half-read paperbacks and

scattered, caseless CDs. She had always been bad at cleaning up, but since the Flight 180 disaster, she had given up altogether.

At least her bed was made, thanks to her mother's rare fit of conscience the last time she was here. Her white blankets were a stark contrast to the walls and carpet of her bedroom, which were a baby pink color, and had been since Clear was six years old. She had been meaning to redecorate for years, and had grand plans for this room involving black, purple and silver paint, and as many candles and pots of glitter as she could afford on her meager allowance.

Somehow, she never seemed to get round to it. She never had anyone over from school, did she? So nobody would see her room. Therefore, there was no point in spending all that time, energy and money on redecorating when she could concentrate on her artwork instead.

At the same time, Clear secretly knew that painting over those walls with a more mature, grown-up color would mean letting go of memories of her father. While she was in here, she could half-close her eyes so she couldn't see the biology and chemistry books on the bookshelf, and imagine herself back to a far simpler time, one where her father could creak open the door first thing in the morning, then creep into the room and kiss her on the nose to wake her.

It had been their early morning ritual, and she had loved that the first thing she saw each morning was the sight of her dad, standing there in his work clothes, beaming down at her, bathed in a deep pink light caused by the early morning sunshine filtering through the curtains and lighting up the room. She would grumble about not wanting to go to school, and then he would promise her some fun thing for them to do at the weekend to make up for it: usually fishing or boating, or sleeping over at the cabin, and the thought would always make her jump out of bed, bright-eyed and ready to take on the day.

God, she missed him.

Clear's gaze crept unbidden to her bookshelf, her worried eyes resting on the framed photo that stood there. It had been there for so long that she no longer saw it, but now, she looked at it afresh and shivered.

It was a typical family picture, such as might be found sitting proudly on the mantel of any house in the city. The photo showed a man in his early thirties sitting beside a young girl on the steps of a freshly painted cabin. They both wore raincoats and cheerful smiles; and the girl was waving a newly caught fish at the camera. The man was ruggedly good-looking with blonde, tousled hair. The look of pride on his face spoke volumes.

It was a happy photo.

Clear drank in the picture for a long moment before she picked it up and turned it over. On the back, in a young girl's handwriting, was an inscription in gaily colored ink: "Me and dad at the cabin. 1986." Beneath it was a crude drawing of a flower, which she had carefully copied from one of the purple blossoms she had brought home from their adventure for her mother. Her dad had helped her pick them, and he had been so proud when she showed him her little drawing.

For the umpteenth time since that terrible, fateful day, Clear wished with a burning passion that she had been there when her father had stopped at that gas station. If she had been there, things might've been different. Granted, she had been too young to have done anything to help her dad once he was already inside the shop, but she reasoned that if she was there in the car with him, he may not have stopped for smokes at all. She could've sung to him, played with him, distracted him while he drove, and he would've forgotten that he needed to stop for cigarettes, or at the very least stopped at another gas station further along.

But he hadn't. He'd picked that one.

One tiny, seemingly inconsequential decision, and three lives had been shattered.

If only she could've saved him.

Clear came back down to earth with a bump. The weight of the world on her shoulders, she paced back and forth restlessly as more pressing concerns intruded on her memories. She knew she had to save Alex. To lose the second man who had ever mattered to her in her entire life was a possibility that she didn't even want to think about. She chewed her nails, gazing out of the window at the FBI sedan, considering her options.

There was no way that she could turn Alex in. That would be like betraying him and everything that they had talked about. But then there was no way she could keep him hidden indefinitely. Sooner or later the cops would get a tip-off, or else they would figure out that she was leaving her own house through the back way, and follow her when she made one of her furtive midnight trips to the grocery store. Then they would find Alex and take him away, locking him up in a detention center where he would be helpless to fight the death that was coming to him.

If anything happened to Alex...

Clear's anguished face suddenly resolved itself. Quickly, she picked up her jacket and ran for the door. It was time to take back control of her life, and there was only one way to do it...

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In the sedan outside, Agent Schreck sat in the driver's seat looking through a pair of binoculars. Agent Weise sat next to him, looking bored.

Agent Weise shifted in his seat, restless and irritable inside his starched regulation suit. They had been sitting here for five hours straight, and naturally his thoughts had drifted a little from the task at hand to more interesting matters. His mind was currently engaged in a shockingly vivid fantasy involving himself, the back room of the NYPD cell block, and Agent Schreck's beautiful, voluptuous wife, Trudy. In his mind, he currently had her naked across their unit manager's iron desk, and now, finally, the time on this stakeout was really flying for him. In fact, he kinda hoped their unit manager would call up and tell them to stay there another couple of hours so he could get their hot new legal secretary involved in the scenario, too.

Agent Weise glanced fitfully at his partner as Trudy panted and gasped in his mind, and a tiny smirk crept onto his face. He knew it was really, really wrong to be having thoughts like these with the woman's husband sitting less than punching distance from him, but a small, mean part of him drew an inordinate amount of satisfaction

from the fact that Agent Schreck really had no clue about what was going on in his head.

A larger, equally mean part of him didn't give a damn, and just concentrated on picturing what Trudy would look like wearing nothing but her stockings and a pair of FBI leather restraint cuffs. Schreck had been married to Trudy for like, ten, eleven years now, and they still had no kids. What was wrong with the man? He obviously didn't deserve her.

Besides which, he told himself, he had every right to disrespect the guy. Agent Schreck had done nothing but wind him up, right from the moment they had first met over six years ago. It wasn't that Schreck ever actually did anything bad to him. It was just his whole calm, sane personality, his hardworking and diligent attitude toward his job, and his sense of civil responsibility that really got on Agent Weine's tits. He just knew there was something wrong with the guy. Nobody was that nice all the time.

Occasionally, Weine would try to annoy him deliberately, just to antagonize the man, and he would be met with the exact same reaction: the same impassive, blank look, the slow careful frown, and then the careless shrug that meant, "Oh, I see the filing boxes have fallen off the shelf again. It must've been an accident. I'd better cut my lunch break short and stay after work for six hours refiling everything so it's all nice and tidy for the people who come in after me in the morning, because I'm so neat and conscientious and the sun shines out of my ass every time I bend down to lick the superintendent's boots."

Agent Weine realized that he was scowling at the dashboard. He blinked and then shook his head to clear away his irritation. He was surely missing the point here. What was the point of having Agent Schreck in his head when he could have Trudy?

Mmmm, Trudy... Agent Weine licked his lips and gazed fixedly out of the darkened windshield. In his mind, Trudy swept the unit manager's desk lamp onto the floor and gazed up at him coyly, a look of ecstasy creeping over her face as she saw the size of his—

"Crap."

"Huh?" Agent Weine started guiltily as Agent Schreck sat up straighter in his seat, refocusing his binoculars onto the tiny square of warmth that was Clear's window.

"She's gone," said Agent Schreck. "She was up there a minute ago."

Agent Weine's lust-fogged vision snapped back into focus, and he stared at his partner, confused. "What are you talking about?"

Before Agent Schreck could reply, a figure stepped smartly up to the car. The two agents glanced out of the window, startled to see Clear Rivers standing beside them, dressed warmly in a red woolen sweater.

Sneaky little minx must have got out around the back way again.

Clear leaned in close, peering in through the window as though the two of them were goldfish in an aquarium. She stared hard at the two agents, as if gauging their trustworthiness. Her body language was closed and defensive, and her gaze didn't quite meet theirs as she stepped even closer to the car. Agent Schreck reluctantly rolled down his window.

"I'm not turning him in," she said.

Agent Weine opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again with a snap as Agent Schreck quickly shushed him.

"But it's too dangerous for him out there," finished Clear. She stared at Agent Schreck, beseeching him to understand. He got her meaning right away and nodded to her respectfully to indicate that she was making the right decision.

Agent Weine stared between him and Clear like a spectator at a tennis match, lost, before comprehension slowly dawned.

Oh, so she was turning Alex in, right? Jeez, why didn't she just say so in the first place?

Clear swallowed, her eyes flitting around the inside of the FBI car like a caged animal. "I go with you," she said firmly as if this was already part of the deal.

"You can't," snapped Agent Weine, attempting to muscle in on the decision making.

This time it was Schreck's turn to glare at his partner. Pompous little jerk.

Clear considered this and then gave a faint nod. She had expected as much.

"Clear, just tell us where he is," said Agent Schreck calmly. "Wait at home, and I give you my word, we'll bring him back safe in protective custody." He gazed steadily at Clear, hoping against hope that this would be a turning point for her. This was a crucial moment. If they had her on their side, the rest of this assignment should all fall into place, and they would have Alex home and safely locked up within the hour.

The word "custody" freaked Clear out a little, but she sensed the agent's sincerity and heaved a defeated sigh. It was for Alex's own good.

She only hoped that she was doing the right thing.

"Don't hurt him," she said.

Agent Weine glanced sidelong at Agent Schreck. The way he was feeling right now, if it were up to him, they'd be going in after Alex with electric cattle prods.

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Back in the warm, fetid depths of the cabin, Alex was in the process of kindling a fire in the fireplace, balling up old newspapers and tossing them in one by one. He stood well back from the open fireplace, more out of paranoia than actual logic. He had resisted the idea of making a fire at first, but after a week and a half of shivering alone in his bed at night under thin, unwashed sheets, he had soon changed his mind. The temperature was dropping lower by the minute as night fell hard on the woodland, and he needed to generate some warmth to keep himself going. He needed to stay healthy if he was going to get through this, and coming down with a cold—or worse—wasn't going to help matters.

Alex crouched down on his haunches as he pulled another couple of pages from the newspaper and began to crumple them into a ball. He paused as a headline caught his attention, and he scanned the page. "MT ABRAMAM HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER DIES IN MYSTERIOUS BLAZE," " screamed the headline.



Guilt swamped Alex as he unrolled the paper and quickly skimmed through the article. It was all about Ms Lewton, and he physically flinched as he saw her picture glaring out at him in black and white with an accusing expression on her face. The article was ominously subheaded, "Flight 180 Survivor Under Suspicion."

Suspicion? Yeah, right, thought Alex. They think I did it, don't they?

How could he prove them wrong? He remembered the way Billy Hitchcock had looked at him in the car and shivered. If his own friends were suspicious of him, what hope did he have of convincing the cops that he was innocent? Or a jury? Or a court judge?

At the bottom of the page, almost as an afterthought, was a second article, headed "PARENTS TO ESTABLISH MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP." Beside the headline were two more black and white pictures: yearbook photos of Christa and Blake.

Alex's grip tightened on the paper as a sudden memory slammed into his head—and his expression rocked as he realized that he had completely forgotten something that was so absolutely pertinent to Death's plan. A moment later, the paper fell from his suddenly nerveless hands and he sat down heavily on the wooden floor, leaning back against the wall as he tried to process his thoughts.

He bit his lip, remembering, then thumped the wall. "I would've moved up next to Tod... Fuck, why didn't I remember that? I never moved, and Clear's seat was in front of mine!"

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and an instant later the lamp's flame flickered and suddenly went out, although Alex felt no breeze.

Alex's mouth went dry, his paranoia working overtime.

If a dying candle wasn't a sign, he didn't know what was.

Trying to remain calm in the face of a full-blown panic attack, Alex snatched his Bic lighter off the nearby shelf without even thinking about the dangers of not using his safety matches. He then got down on his hands and knees in the semi-darkness and crawled towards the lamp to relight it. He flicked open the top of his lighter with trembling hands and pressed the trigger mechanism once, twice, three times. The lighter stayed obstinately unlit. He pressed it a

fourth time and then jumped as a crackle of electricity flared out of the top, almost like a miniature flash of lightning.

Alex stared at it, his heart pounding. No way should a lighter be able to do that.

This meant only one thing.

Alex gasped, his face reflecting the horror he was feeling.

"Clear's next."

# ELEVEN

Lightning speared through the sky as Clear restlessly paced to and fro in her bedroom. She'd thought that sending the agents out to bring in Alex had been a good idea an hour ago, but now, cooped up in the claustrophobic familiarity of her mother's house, Clear was starting to regret her decision. There had been one small flaw in her plan, and that was she had no way of contacting Alex to tell him of her decision.

There was no land line at the cabin, and he had no cell phone. She stared out of her window in an agony of indecision, knowing that she should stay home, but desperately wanting to slip out and run through the woods to the cabin to give Alex some kind of advance warning.

What if he saw the police coming and decided to run, and ended up hurting himself? If she gave him advance warning, he'd probably try to run anyway. Then he would be out there, alone. The woods were a dangerous place to be at night if you didn't know what you were doing. One slip and you could wind up at the bottom of a gully, or worse.

Clear cursed herself for not thinking things through. She was such an idiot! She had allowed her concern for Alex's safety to blind her to the possible bad repercussions of her actions. Now all she could do was pray that the two FBI agents knew what they were doing, and hope that they would bring Alex back to her safely.

Clear flinched as thunder suddenly banged across the sky, shockingly close. An instant later, the horizon bloomed white and lightning cracked through the air like a celestial whip, striking the top of a transformer pole, set up near the house.

Clear jumped and ducked back behind her curtain in fright as the transformer blew up in a shower of sparks, snapping two long, heavy power lines that connected Clear's house to the grid. They tore loose from the pole and the severed ends tumbled down into the yard, whipping in the wind.

*Krrtttzzzzzzzz...KLUNK!* All the lights in the house went out as the transformer shorted out. Brilliant arc lights crackled outside, lighting up the sudden darkness of her bedroom with a flickering bluish-white light.

Curious, Clear peered out of the window again to check out the damage.

Outside the house, the two severed power lines arced violently, raw electricity pouring from the broken ends and earthing itself on whatever was nearby. Each line whipped unpredictably like a garden hose with the water turned on full, striking the ground and each other.

Clear watched them as they snapped and crackled through the air, both freaked and fascinated at the sight of all that power being released. To her eyes, the two lines looked like mean, black snakes, furiously attacking everything around them. As she watched, the larger cable touched the metal rotary clothesline outside, setting it spinning with a *zap*. It then started slapping at the side of the wooden house, almost as though it was trying to get in.

Unnerved, Clear backed away from the window and moved to a pair of candles on the mantle, fumbling in a drawer for her silver lighter. She'd get a bit of light in the room and then call someone to come and fix the power lines before they caused any more damage.

As she lit the candles, one after the other, she heard the sound of frantic barking coming from the front yard. Her eyes widened in horror as the realization hit her.

Rex was still outside!

The big German shepherd usually slept outside in his kennel in the backyard as her mother didn't want him in the house. Clear realized that the dog could be in danger from the broken power cables if she didn't move fast.

Snatching up the candle, she walked down to the other side of the small house, moving quickly to the kitchen. Outside, blue light crackled, throwing scary looking shapes on to the kitchen shades. Pulling the curtain aside, Clear looked out into the backyard.

Outside, there was chaos. The old circular clothesline spun like a pin-wheel in the wind, its ends still glowing red-hot from where the

cable had zapped it. One of the power cables had already died, having touched a heavy iron girder lying in the yard and shorting out, but the other cable was still live, whipping through the air like an angry eel. In the furthest corner of the yard, Rex barked and snapped at the giant sparking cable, freaking out. He was tied to a nearby tree with a length of stout chain and he couldn't get away. Even as Clear watched, the fallen power line lashed out at the dog, unerringly striking closer and closer, as though the cable was guided by a malevolent force that was hell-bent on barbecuing the animal.

Clear started towards the door, then stopped, mentally weighing up the risks involved in venturing out to get Rex. If that power cable touched her, she would be toast, and then Alex would be on his own, but she couldn't just stand here and watch Rex get fried. She'd had him since he was a puppy, and over the years he'd become more like family to her than her actual family had been.

Outside, Rex barked again, and Clear reached a decision.

Screw it. She had to save Rex.

She set the candle down on the kitchen table and quickly grabbed her coat off the back of a chair. As she did so, the light flickered. Clear glanced over at it. Although there was no window open, the flame whipped back and forth as though blown by a strong wind before extinguishing itself.

Blue smoke swirled ominously towards the ceiling.

Clear paused, frowning at the candle. It sat silently in a patch of moonlight, a single thread of smoke climbing upwards from the smoldering wick.

Then Rex started barking again and Clear went outside to rescue him.

\*\*\*

Alex charged out of the front door of the cabin into the cold night air, pulling on his jacket as he ran and cursing under his breath. How could he have been so stupid? Ten days wasted in that stinking little cabin, when all along it had been Clear who was the one in danger.

For ten whole days she had been walking around in the world, completely exposed, with no clue that she could die at any minute.

A shudder of guilt ran through his body. For all he knew, she could be dead already. If anything had happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

Alex landed hard on the ground and started pounding up the stony drive, his gaze fixed firmly on the distant road. Before he had gone more than a few paces, flashing headlights suddenly panned through the trees. A siren sounded, alarmingly close, and whirling red and blue lights flashed, setting off fireworks inside Alex's chest.

Cop cars!

How had they found him? How? How? Clear was the only one who knew the location of the cabin, which meant that...

Alex stopped dead in his tracks, his face wild with panic. Had something happened to Clear? There was no way that she would willingly have told the police where Alex was. What had happened? What had they done to her?

There was no time for thinking now. He had to get away, and then he could think about it later. If the cops caught him, they would lock him up, and then Clear would be dead, if she wasn't already. He couldn't protect her from the inside of a police cell.

Alex whirled and broke into a dead run as the FBI unmarked sedan and three police four-by-fours thundered up the driveway towards the cabin. Inside the sedan, Agent Schreck pointed out of the passenger window.

"There!"

The distinctive figure of Alex hared past them at full speed, like a rabbit caught in their headlights. Agent Weine turned the wheel as Alex headed towards the dark forest, swearing under his breath. It was like trying to catch a shadow. Kid had to be guilty to be running like this, and after the Lewton fire, they probably had enough evidence to put him away in the juvenile detention center for life. He had been giving them the run around all week, but now they finally had him cornered.

There was no escape from the law.

Agent Weine frowned as he watched Alex running towards the big lake on the outskirts of the forest. What did he think he was going to do, swim to the far shore? They would catch him before he had gone three strokes.

Crazy kid.

Then Agent Weine saw the wooden canoe, upturned on the bank, and thumped the dashboard in dismay. Even as he applied the brake and reached for the door handle of the sedan, the kid had righted the little boat and was dragging it into the water. With a surprisingly agile hop, Alex was on board and started paddling determinedly away from the shore, his oar flying.

Agent Weine pulled the sedan over as the cops in front of him braked to a stop, skidding in the dirt. The two sheriffs leapt out of their vehicles, shining high-powered flashlights in Alex's direction. Shouts rang through the night air along with the crackle of their police radios.

"ALEX!" Agent Schreck bellowed.

His only reply was the splash of water as Alex paddled frantically away from the shore. The two sheriffs ran towards the water, futilely waving their rifles. Agent Weine's eyebrows shot up and he waved a hand at them impatiently. What did they think they were gonna do, shoot an unarmed seventeen-year old boy to stop him from running away?

"C'mon!" he bellowed, running back towards his own car. "We'll go around. Get back in the car!"

"Let's go! Move it!" yelled Agent Schreck, backing him up.

Jumping back into their vehicles, the officers gunned their engines and took off towards the main road to apprehend their suspect.

\*\*\*

Back at her house, Clear flung open the back door and charged out into the yard as fast as she could, hoping that she wasn't too late. At the end of the yard, Rex barked and snapped and snarled at the lashing power line, foam dribbling from his mouth as he bayed at the hostile presence in his own backyard.

He didn't know what it was, but it was too bright and too loud and it was making a horrible noise. Maybe if he barked loud enough at it, it would go away.

His chain rattled as he danced back and forth, the whites of his eyes flashing in canine terror. The power line spat right back at him, the deadly live current grounding itself on the grass just feet from the tip of the dog's nose. Clear ran towards the stranded animal as fast as she could, hoping that she would get to him in time before the stupid mutt fried himself.

"Rex!" she yelled over the sound of the storm. "Get away from it!"

Rex ignored her, his barks running together into one long howl. The air flashed with unleashed power, and there was a sharp smell of burned wood and ozone that rolled towards the house along with banks of smoke.

Clear tore around to the side of the large circular ground pool, but as she approached, the power line whipped away from Rex, reflexively lashing against the circular clothesline frame nearby. An explosion rocked the yard as fifty thousand volts of raw power grounded itself on the metal clothesline. Sparks flew as the base pole was snapped in two. Clear watched in horror as the whole thing was flung up into the air, still spinning madly, and then hurtled back down again...

Right towards her.

Clear flung herself to one side with a yell, landing with a thump on the wet grass. An instant later, the metal base pole plunged into the ground with a loud sluicing sound, just inches from her head.

Clear stared at it in horror and then convulsively pushed herself back up again. Springing to her feet, she continued running towards the tree, frantic to get to Rex. She reached the dog a few moments later and quickly grabbed him, dragging him away from the fallen power line with all her strength. She tried to unfasten his collar, but he pulled away from her again and again, determinedly lunging at the sparking power line, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl. Clear yanked him backwards and tried to slide her fingers inside his collar to undo the clasp, but he was straining so hard against the collar that she couldn't get hold of the slippery clasp.



"Come on!" Clear yelled in frustration.

Behind her, the rising wind tore the circular clothesline frame out of the ground and gaily rolled it across the yard where it slammed into the tarp-covered ground pool. It was traveling at such speed that one of the sharp arms of the line punctured the thin metal. Water streamed from the rupture, flooding out and soaking the grass. Moments later the power line whipped again, striking the frame with an angry flash like a blacksmith wielding a hammer, as though trying to drive it deeper. A moment later, the side of the pool began to buckle, weakened by the blow. One by one, the rivets holding together the steel frame of the pool began to break and pop loose from the surrounding canvas, which was taut with water.

With a low groan, the pool burst, and the aluminum sides gave way under the strain. A tidal wave of mildewy green water flooded out as the pool's eight hundred gallons rushed out across the grass like a giant wave breaking in the backyard. Clear let go of the dog's collar and gasped as cold water flowed across her shoes. The water quickly rose up to her knees, completely drenching her.

A few yards away, the power line crackled ominously, arcing through the air, then reversed its course and began swinging down towards the water lapping around Clear's legs.

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Alex's canoe pulled up to the edge of a grassy bank, bobbing up and down on the waves. Without even bothering to look over his shoulder, Alex launched himself out of the little boat, plunging up to his ankles in the thick, cold, stodgy mud of the lake bed. As soon as his feet touched dry ground Alex began running, and then fell over with a jolt as one of his mud-encrusted feet snagged on a hidden branch.

Nice one.

That was a good start.

Cursing under his breath, he lunged to his feet and took off like a rocket into the woods. Twigs crunched underfoot and brambles scratched at his legs as he ran through the darkened woodland,

relying on his instincts to keep him going in a straight line. The road looped around behind the lake, he remembered, and Clear's house was a good mile and a half down the road. He would make it. He had to. He had to get to her in time and warn her about the danger that she was in. They couldn't go back to the cabin now the cops had found it, but maybe there was somewhere else that they could go, far from town, where they could hole themselves up for a little while.

Anything would be better than dying.

Branches whipped across Alex's face as he ran, but he shoved them aside and kept going, feeling terrified for Clear, but at the same time almost giddy with freedom. Those ten days cooped up in the cabin had felt like a lifetime. To be outside, away from the wooden confines of those four musty walls, was wonderful and scary at the same time. It was so dark he could scarcely see his hand in front of his face, and as he ran, the paranoid part of his mind screamed at him in fear about all the dangers that surrounded him: he could fall and break his neck, hit his head on a branch, crack his skull on a boulder, run headlong into a hornet's nest, fall into a bog or some quicksand, get bitten by a poisonous spider or snake.

Delirious from the adrenaline coursing through his body, he told his paranoia to go take a flying leap.

Alex burst out of the wood on the edge of a clearing, and loped towards the road with a huge sense of relief. He had made it! Now all he had to do was follow the road for a bit and he would be at Clear's house in—

Blue and red lights flashed up the lane. Alex froze like a stunned deer as multiple headlights washed over him, pinning him in their glare.

The cops had found him again!

Mindlessly, Alex ran across the road and plunged back into the wood on the other side. He started running, not caring what direction he was going in, and just concentrated on getting away from the police as fast as he could. If he could just shake the cops, sooner or later he had to come to a road. Clear's house wasn't far now. He just had to keep going...

Alex's lungs burned as he tore through the moonlit forest, slipping and sliding on the muddy ground. Everything was getting out of control again, and Alex swore when he thought about how close he was to Clear's house. But with the cops chasing him like this, it might as well be miles away.

From behind him came the sound of slamming car doors and angry shouts. Then flashlight beams crossed behind him, piercing the darkness, and the sound of footsteps echoed through the trees as the cops and FBI agents left their vehicles and pursued him on foot through the woods.

Alex snapped a glance over his shoulder to check the position of the agents. They were close and seemed to be gaining on him. They were fresh, whereas he was starting to slow down as fatigue poisoned his muscles and clouded his mind. Doubt started to creep into his head that he might not make it, but he instantly dismissed the thought.

He *had* to make it. There was no other way.

As he stumbled onwards, lungs heaving, he heard Agent Schreck's voice ringing through the trees.

"Alex! We're trying to help you!"

Then quit chasing me! Alex thought. Drawing on his last reserves of strength, he increased his pace, his feet flying over the ground, dodging and ducking blindly through a grove of young sycamores. He just had to find somewhere to hide, wait till the cops had gone, then make his way back through the forest to Clear's house.

Except that they would probably be waiting for him there now, wouldn't they?

Alex was starting to panic. The cops and agents were getting closer by the second. He was already exhausted and they were nearly upon him.

"Alex!"

Alex looked over his shoulder, running at full tilt.

Then he yelped as the ground vanished from beneath his feet. He felt a sickening lurch in the pit of his stomach as he plunged headlong over the lip of a steep downward slope, heading downwards into a rock-strewn gully.

He felt as if he were falling in slow-motion.

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Clear was losing patience with her rescue attempt. Rex pulled away from her for the fifth time in a row, barking insanely as water from the ruptured pool cascaded over his paws and the broken power line crackled in the background. The animal was too hysterical to listen to her or respond to commands, and now Clear was resorting to brute force to drag him clear of the power line. Yelling at the mutt, Clear hauled him backwards on the end of his chain, watching him snort and sneeze as the water rose to his chin. The water from the burst pool stank of chlorine and mildew, and she hoped that the dog would fit in the bath when she got him inside, because after this, they were both going to need one.

Panting with exertion, Clear finally got Rex's collar off, wrenching it over his head in a last-ditch attempt to free him. She threw the dog collar onto the grass and then looked around quickly for the power line.

She gave a yell of fright. It was less than ten feet from her, tangled in the branches of a tree, jerking around as if possessed. Even as she watched, it freed itself and spun down through the air, whipping moodily back and forth like a cat's tail. It seemed to coil itself, ready to strike, and then shot out towards her, its sparking end flying down towards the pool of water on the grass—the pool of water that she was currently standing in.

With a shriek, Clear dropped the chain and gave the dog a hefty slap on its backside. "Run!" she yelled.

The dog took off towards the road like a shot, yelping loudly.

Without looking back, Clear splashed towards the house as fast as her feet would carry her and made a flying leap for the rose trellis. She landed on it just as the power line dropped down into the pool of water in the yard. There was a flash and a *bang*, and a bolt of electricity arced out of the line and flew across the surface of the water in an expanding circle. Clear felt a burst of heat sear her legs

and gave a yell of fright, but it was okay. She was safe, and the bottom of the trellis was a good three feet clear of the water.

Clear hauled herself up further and hooked her elbow around one of the crossbar slats to stop herself from falling. Hanging onto the rose trellis, praying the fragile wooden structure wouldn't give way, she risked a glance over her shoulder. The power cable sparked and snapped down below her, thrashing around in the foaming water as though beating out its fury at being thwarted. Clear saw the water lap hungrily at the bottom of the trellis, and realized how close she had come to being fried. Now all she had to do was figure out how to get out of this mess, and she would be home free. She hoped that Rex wouldn't be stupid enough to return to the yard, or he would be dead before she could figure out a way to save him.

Because right now, she was stranded.

Something moved in the corner of her eye. She whipped her head up, flicking a suspicious glance over at the yard. The water pooled on the grass shivered, and a large dark shadow passed across the surface, seeming to head right for her before vanishing.

Clear shivered, profoundly unnerved.

On the ground, the power cable sparked, bumping slowly over the grass towards the house. Meanwhile, electricity sizzled on the surface of the water beneath her. The cable came closer and closer, at any minute threatening to tear free of the languid pull of the water and fly through the air at her. Clear realized there was no way she was getting down from her perch, and that if that power line got free and touched her, she would be dead.

She had to get off this trellis, and quick.

Clear threw her head back, her hair flying in the rising wind. Staring upwards in a frenzy, she saw with a stab of relief that there was a window at the top of the trellis.

With a yell of defiance, she started to climb.

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On the other side of the forest, Alex gave a desperate yell as empty air whistled past his ears and the world spun around him. A moment

later, he hit the side of the steep slope with a bruising thud, still traveling at full speed, and tumbled uncontrollably down the hillside in a shower of limbs and autumn leaves. Pain shot through him as he rolled over thorny plants and rocks, and he grabbed out at passing branches as he stumbled. He was moving too fast to get a grip. Panicking, he threw out his arms and legs as the slope leveled out slightly, tensing and locking all his muscles at once in a frantic bid to halt his downward plunge.

It worked. Alex bounced a couple more times then jerked to a muscle-aching halt at the bottom of the hill, his face three inches from a thick, sharp wooden spike.

Alex gasped, frozen in place.

Seconds ticked by as once again, Alex realized that he wasn't dead. In a daze, he reached out to touch the spike. It was jutting out from the end of a snapped-off branch, five-inch spurs of needlepointed wood forming a quill of daggers at the base of the main stalk.

Nasty.

It was almost as if fate were taunting him.

There was no time to reflect on his close call. Flashlights shone down the wooded hill and washed over his semi-prone form, and Alex heard the jangle of what he presumed were handcuffs being passed from hand to hand as the cops tried to figure out how to get down the hill without falling.

He jumped to his feet. Without even stopping to catch his breath or check his wounds, he carefully edged around the wooden spike and ran off into the darkness, his feet splashing in water as he raced along the path of a small stream. He was freezing cold and his body ached with a dozen fresh injuries, but he increased his pace, determination filling him with extra strength.

He would get through this, and he would save Clear. She needed him, and he was letting her down, but the fact that he was still alive filled him with hope. If she was dead, surely Death would have come after him by now?

Alex thought uneasily about the wooden spike that had nearly impaled him and increased his pace. He would find Clear, and they would escape together.

The alternative was too horrible to even think about.

Behind him, the sound of loud cursing told him that the sheriffs and the FBI agents had safely negotiated the hill and were close behind him. Alex smiled in grim amusement. Despite the direness of his predicament, he guessed that this was probably the only exercise those cops had gotten in a long time.

He ran into a clearing and paused for breath, his dark-sensitized eyes searching for anything resembling a light. He had to find the road. If only he could get to Clear's house, everything would be alright.

There was a loud rumble of thunder, as though the heavens above him had a bellyache. Alex stood stock still as he realized with a flash of horror that he was out in the open in a thunderstorm.

The day was just getting better and better.

Alex tensed his muscles, preparing to run for cover, but as he did so, the sky above him lit up with the biggest, brightest flash of lightning he had ever seen in his life. It speared down towards the earth with terrifying power and smashed into a nearby tree, zipping down the trunk to the ground in a searing orange line and setting one of the larger branches ablaze.

Alex let out his breath in a shaky gasp and turned triumphant eyes up at the sky.

Missed me, fucker!

Then...

*Creeeeeeeeeaaakkkk...*

Alex swallowed and carefully turned around. With a horrific feeling of déjà vu, he watched as the tree started to topple towards him.

Adrenaline jump-started Alex's muscles and he began to run, his mind crashing on empty. He heard a cracking sound behind him as the tree bumped and scraped on the branches of the surrounding trees on the way down, snapping off branches and turning smaller trees into kindling. Alex put everything he had into running, into forcing his fatigued leg muscles to move, pounding back up the slope towards freedom and...

The darkness around him seemed to grow darker. Instinct forced him to throw a panicked look over his shoulder, up into the air.

The tree was zooming down towards him like a giant flyswatter wielded by the gods.

Oh, fu—

Automatically, Alex dodged to the right as the tree smashed down into the earth barely five feet from him. Alex threw up his arms to shield his face as one of the smaller branches crashed down on top of him.

Alex went down hard, knocked to the ground by the falling branch. A shock of cold assaulted him, and he realized that he had landed in the stream. His face plunged into the freezing cold water as the tree settled around him, almost crushing him under its weight, and he reflexively jerked his head backwards to take a breath.

His eyes flew open in horror.

He couldn't move his head.

Alex thrashed around underwater, his nose and mouth just an inch below the surface, but he couldn't budge. The branch was holding him fixed in place, and every time he tried to jerk his face out of the water, the back of his head bumped hard on solid wood.

He was pinned down by the tree branch, face-down in the creek.

Alex's eyes flashed with panic as he battled to push himself out of the water far enough to take a breath. Icy cold water invaded his nose and throat as his still-heaving lungs betrayed him, trying to suck in vital air after his panicked sprint for safety. His face scraped on the rocks on the bottom of the creek as he frantically tried to twist his body out from under the tree, but he still couldn't move.

Slowly, Alex started to drown.

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As Alex struggled, faint flashlights washed over the fallen tree. Agent Schreck and the pair of sheriffs cautiously approached the clearing from the other side, kicking aside brambles and muttering a constant stream of complaints. They hadn't seen the tree fall,



although they had heard it. They paused, confused, panning their flashlights across the darkness ahead of them.

The forest was still. Whatever had happened, they had missed it, and now Alex had apparently vanished into thin air.

Finally giving up, Agent Weine took off his fogged glasses and wiped the sweat out of his eyes, leaning back against a curiously warm tree stump. He hadn't run that far or that fast in a long time. Now he had a stitch in his side, and from the vile smell drifting up from his shoes, he was pretty sure he'd just stepped in something foul.

Great. Just great.

"We lost him," he announced, defeated.

Agent Schreck pounded up beside him at an easy lope and stopped, his hyper-alert brown eyes scanning the woodland. "There's only one place he could be heading," he commented, not even out of breath.

"No shit," grumbled Agent Weine, scraping gingerly at his shoe with a stick. They should've just driven on to Clear's house and waited there instead of going on this fun little stroll through the great American countryside. He hated nature. All that fresh air and uncut lumber gave him the creeps.

Shrugging, he got to his feet and moved off to rejoin the others. Reaching a mutual agreement, the officials silently regrouped and headed back to the road, their flashlights bobbing through the dense trees.

Meanwhile, pinned under the tree just yards away from them, Alex fought to raise his head, his chest bursting as he struggled to avoid drowning in two inches of water.

# TWELVE

A couple of miles away, Clear pulled herself up the rose trellis, hand over hand, her muscles shaking with the effort. The storm seemed to pick up as she climbed, the howling wind tearing at her clothes and throwing her long hair into her eyes. A wooden slat cracked under her weight as she came within sight of the window, and she slipped backwards with a small yelp, grabbing hold of fistfuls of climbing ivy to stop herself from tumbling down into the foaming, electrified water below.

Letting out her breath in a gasp, she continued climbing, her gaze fixed determinedly on the dark square of the window just a few feet above her. Lightning and thunder boomed through the air around her, barely audible to Clear above the arcing, crackling, gurgling sound of the broken power line.

Look at this mess you've gotten me into, she mentally scolded Rex as she climbed. But she knew she couldn't have just left him there to die.

Finally reaching the top of the trellis, Clear started edging across the front of the house, bracing her feet on the top of the slatted trim that covered the downstairs windows. She grabbed onto the slates to steady herself as she moved upwards towards the window—then screamed as one of the tiles gave way, sending her slithering backwards.

She flung out her hand instinctively and managed to snag the edge of the gutter as she fell, jerking to a halt and interrupting her near-fatal slide. She clung there, kicking and spinning as the power line snarled beneath her. Clear felt the sharp edge of the plastic gutter cutting her hand, but ignored the pain and concentrated on swinging her body back and forth, trying to get some momentum so that she could get a second handhold.

One swing.

Two.

Three... and up!

She reached up with her other hand and seized the edge of the tiling as her first hand started to cramp. She then pulled herself up as quickly as her exhausted muscles would allow her. The tiles were slick with algae and rain, but Clear concentrated everything she had on edging her way across them, hanging by her arms, until she was directly below the window. Reaching up, she grabbed hold of the lip of the sill awkwardly and pulled, ready to climb through the window...

Which was shut, locked from the inside.

Clear swore.

Beneath her, the power line wrenched itself free of the fast-draining pool of water and reared upwards, its sparking end blindly turning from side to side as though searching for her. Sparks crackled upwards and then the cable shot towards Clear as though drawn by a magnet.

With a cry of effort, Clear swung her arm back and smashed the window with her elbow. The jagged glass sliced through her thin woolen sweater, gashing her arm, but she scarcely felt it. Senseless with fear, she smashed at the glass again, enlarging the hole, then heaved herself up with the last of her strength and launched herself headfirst through the sharp opening. Her boots vanished through the window just as the power line reached window height, snapping at her heels.

Clear flopped down onto the floor on the other side with a gasp of relief and lay there panting on the carpet.

Finally, she was safe.

Outside, the power line rose through the air like a fire hose on full blast, and smacked against the outside of the house as though angry to be foiled once again. It scrabbled irritably across the wooden shutters for a moment or two before touching the house's fuse box which exploded with a crack and a sizzle of current. A dangerous overload of power zapped from the live wire into the domestic power supply, overloading the circuit breakers and sending a stream of raw electricity surging back through the copper wires, deep into the heart of the house.

Inside the house, Clear nearly jumped out of her skin as the TV in her bedroom imploded with a bang right in front of her. Sparks streamed through the air and glass rained down onto the floor as the shattered tube of the TV set glowed a bright orange as current continued to flow through it.

Clear rolled to her feet and lurched away from it, her heart pounding. Was there no escape from this thing? It was almost like it was hunting her.

Her eyes snapped into focus as a terrible thought slammed into her mind. Her eyes flew to the TV set, watching it spark and glow. If all this shit about Death's design was actually true, then Alex was supposed to be the next to die, followed by her.

If the world was suddenly trying to kill her, that meant...

Clear squeezed her eyes tight shut, blocking off the thought.

The electrical socket next to her exploded outwards as the main fuses blew, making Clear jump. A blast of blue sparks jetted from the outlet, a miniature version of the furious leviathan outside. She spun away from it and started pounding through her room towards the hallway.

As she ran... *fzzzz... BLAM!*

The overhead light exploded, followed by the lamp on her dresser, then her electric alarm clock. Clear screamed in fright and ran for cover, cowering as blasts of flame erupted from every electrical outlet in the room as she passed by. It was almost as though she was being deliberately driven out of the room. She pelted out through the door, shielding her face from the blaze of sparks and smoke that arced through the air towards her. She tore down the hallway, sparks exploding from more lamps and electrical outlets, momentarily blinding her. Her foot turned on a loose corner of the rug and she fell to the floor, winding herself.

She lay there screaming as all around her every electrical outlet and light in the house exploded, filling the hallway with a maelstrom of light and fire, as though every firework in the box had been let off at once. Sparks landed on her exposed legs and she yelled in pain, covering her head with her hands to shield her face from the acrid smoke billowing around her.

It was true. The world was trying to kill her.

At that moment, lying there on the floor, Clear wanted nothing more than just to curl up into a ball and stay where she was, and let fate do what it wanted with her. Wherever she went, Death would find her. There truly was no escape—the deaths of the others had proven that. Then a bolt of realization went through her, stronger than anything she had ever felt before. She had to move. She had to get to Alex and find out if he was still alive. If what she feared was true, then she had to save herself—she had to come up with a plan that would enable her to live, to cheat fate and to deny Death its fun and games.

She wouldn't be beaten that easily.

Whatever would her father say if he could see her now?

Gritting her teeth, Clear pushed herself up from the smoldering carpet, determination burning in her eyes. She sprinted towards the end of the darkened corridor and leapt down into the stairwell, taking the stairs three at a time towards freedom.

They say that you can't run from Death, but Clear was going to give it her very best shot.

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Back in the forest, pinned beneath the fallen tree, Alex was close to passing out. Lying facedown in the stream with a massive tree lying on top of him, Alex had never felt more hopeless in his life. His lungs felt like they were filled with napalm, and his brain screamed at him for oxygen. His blood thundered in his head as he tried to think, tried to move, tried to do anything but lie there and drown. He saw his parents' faces float accusingly in front of him, and was filled with sorrow at losing them, at letting them down, even as the water started to fill his mouth, his throat, trickling down into his lungs in an icy stream.

As he lay there in the mud, a jolt of what felt like electricity filled him. A red-hot image of Clear slammed into his mind, so startlingly real that it shocked him. It was as though he had suddenly tapped

into her mind, and he felt a sense of terror fill him that he somehow knew was coming from her.

Clear was in danger. Fate was on her tail, and it was coming for her, just as it was coming for him.

She was going to die, and it was going to be his fault.

He couldn't let that happen.

Alex's eyes darted open underwater. His scrabbling hands found new purchase on the slimy bottom of the creek bed, and taking a second to gather the last of his strength, he arched his back and dug his hands into the cold, slimy silt.

This was it. His last shot at saving both himself and Clear.

Locking his arms, Alex pushed with all his might, his arms shaking with the effort. At first it felt like nothing was happening and his rapidly-fogging mind cried out in despair. So this is how I die, he thought miserably, and felt a sense of sick helplessness.

Fate had won. His parents had lost their son after all.

Then, just as his strength began to ebb away, he felt definite movement above him. It wasn't much, but it was movement nonetheless. With a last burst of adrenaline, Alex straightened his arms and strained upwards with all his might.

With a creak, the branch above him lifted up a couple of inches. Alex felt his face clear the water and gave a deep gasp, expanding his water-filled lungs and drinking in the air.

Oxygen had never tasted sweeter.

He felt it sweep through him, cooling his blood, driving the fire from his lungs, and dampening down the screaming pressure in his head. It infused him with fresh strength as he locked his muscles and pushed again, taking the weight of the branch on his shoulders, determined not to let it drop back down and crush him back into the swirling stream.

A moment later he popped out from under the branch. He rolled onto his back on the wet foliage beside the creek, coughing and gasping and jerking around as he fought to clear his lungs of the dirty, cold water.

That was something he didn't ever want to go through again.

Alex's eyes fluttered open weakly, and before he knew it his body was moving again, as though on autopilot, shakily climbing to its feet on muscles that felt like they were made out of hot lead. With barely a pause to cough the last of the water out of his lungs, Alex started stumbling across the uneven ground of the clearing, heading toward the road.

He would get to Clear's house and save her if it was the last thing he ever did.

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Clear was in the process of getting the hell out of her house. Panting, she burst through the side door of the house into the musty darkness of the garage, sparks spraying behind her as the last of the lights blew. Her Corolla was parked amongst the tangled remains of her artwork, its windows coated in a thin layer of dust. Clear ran to the car as fast as her legs would carry her and hurled open the door before leaping in. She slammed the door behind her and flipped the sun visor down, dropping the keys into her palm. She knew instinctively that if she didn't get away from the house as quickly as possible, whatever was chasing her would catch up with her.

And that would be bad.

As she reached for the hand brake, a muffled thumping sound from the garage door drew her attention. Startled, she jerked her head up and stared out of the dusty front windscreen. Blue light flashed under the door, and it took her a moment before she realized what it was.

The power line had found her.

And it was trying to get in.

Unbelieving, Clear quickly scooted over into the driver's seat. Jabbing her key into the ignition, she stabbed frantically at the automatic garage door opener mounted on the dashboard.

Nothing happened. The unit was dead.

Clear realized that the power must've blown in the garage, too, which left her with only one option. Swallowing hard, she started the engine of the car. It caught with a throaty growl that boomed around

the confines of the tiny garage, and Clear shifted into reverse. Screwing up her nerves, she gunned the engine and stared into the rearview mirror, her gaze fixed determinedly on a point beyond the garage door. She had to get out of there, right now. Every nerve in her body was on red alert, howling at her to go to the cabin and find Alex before the FBI got to him.

A shattering sound came from the garage door. Clear saw with a jolt of disbelief that the power line had broken through the top of the garage door. The electricity fizzed across the metal joints in the boards and had created a chain reaction, blowing the wooden boards off, one by one.

This was beyond a joke.

Time to ride.

Gritting her teeth, Clear floored the gas pedal.

*Blam!* The garage door splintered as the back of the Corolla made contact with it. The car slowed slightly with the impact, then its tires got a grip on the leaf-strewn concrete floor and the boxy car shouldered its way out through the wreckage of the door.

As it did so, the vibrations of the car's impact caused the mechanical door opener to give way, forcing the long metal arm to disengage from the door. An instant later, the heavy, hooked end of the arm smashed down through the front windshield, making Clear scream with fright. It locked onto the windshield wiper grille and jerked the car to a halt, the other end remaining attached to the garage roof interior, acting as an anchor.

The Corolla shuddered, its wheels spinning uselessly, immovably held in place by the metal arm.

Outside the garage door, the power line lashed the door again, seconds from breaking through.

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Alex pounded up the driveway and sprinted across the fenceless backyard towards Clear's house, willing his exhausted muscles to keep going. His eyes burned and his head pounded with tiredness and cold, but the thought of Clear spurred him on. An image of Ms



Lewton rose unbidden in his mind—if only he had arrived a few minutes earlier, he might've had a shot at saving her.

A thousand "if only's" couldn't bring her back, not now, and the only thing he could do was make sure that he learned from his mistakes. This might be his one chance to save Clear, and if he screwed up now, he would have the rest of his life to regret it.

Assuming, of course, that he would actually live a longish life.

Alex increased his pace and rounded the trees that screened off her house from the road. He stumbled to a halt, his eyes widening in horror at the sight that awaited him; the sight that he had been dreading.

Please, God, no.

Clear's backyard was in chaos, as though the scene of a recent battle. Smoke hung thickly in the air. The circular clothesline frame had been torn out of the ground, lying in tatters beside the smashed remains of the above-ground pool, which lolled sadly on the grass like a giant deflated balloon. Two severed power lines slapped back and forth by the house: one tangled in a tree, the other flopping out of sight behind the house. The one in the backyard was on the fritz, the power coming and going in quick, jerky blasts that drew plasma-tinted sparks whenever it touched the flooded grass of the yard. There was the strong smell of burning.

"Clear!" Alex yelled.

No reply.

Alex backed away from the water, and his breath stopped as his gaze hunted back and forth, searching for a body in the water. To his relief he could see none.

Edging around the water, keeping one wary eye on the sparking power line, he tried to figure out what had happened. A dog collar lay on the ground by the tree, and he noticed that the rose trellis was pulled away from the wall, the roses battered and bent, as though someone had tried to climb up it. His eye traced the wooden framework upwards, and he saw that the window at the top was smashed.

Sparks and what looked like fire flickered behind the darkened glass.

Alex's feet were moving before his conscious brain had even caught up with what he was doing. He tore towards the back door, dread seizing his body in an iron grip. An image of Ms Lewton's body lying in her blazing kitchen rose phantom-like in his mind, and he increased his pace still further to a full-out sprint. The power line jumped towards him as he passed it, crackling aggressively, but Alex lurched to one side, easily avoiding it and diving into the bushes. He dodged around the pool of water, heading for the back door.

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In the garage around the other side of the house, Clear slammed the gas pedal down again and again, frantic with panic, trying to break free from the large metal arm that held her car in an iron grip. Smoke drifted up from the tires as the Corolla's wheels spun uselessly, the engine revving furiously.

It was no good.

The car was stuck. Clear yelled out in frustration, her terror swiftly turning to a blinding fury as she gunned the engine again and again, mindlessly trying to jerk the big car loose from the clutches of the garage. In her mind, she heard fate laughing at her, mocking her pathetic attempts to escape. But the harder she revved the engine, the deeper the hook dug into her car. Outside the door, the thick power cable arced, sparks snapping towards the end of the car as the cable melted through the last few feet of the destroyed garage door.

Foot to the floor, Clear screamed at the car to move.

As the rear end of the car slid back and forth, fighting to free itself from the clutches of the garage, the screws holding the metal arm to the ceiling began to pull away, inch by rusted inch. The whole garage shook under the strain as the powerful engine pulled on the crossbeam, artwork and cans of paint clattering off the shelves onto the floor. As Clear gave the car another shot of gas, a big metal can of turpentine on the top shelf wobbled. The "Highly Flammable" warning on the side of the can glinted in the light of the power cable as the can was bumped closer and closer to the edge of the shelf by

the rattling of the garage. Finally, it lost its battle and tumbled over, soaring end over end, and smacked onto the floor.

If Clear had noticed its fall, she would've been relieved to see that for once, she'd remembered to put a cap on the can.

Above her, the motor of the door opener finally pulled away from the crossbeam as the last couple of screws came loose. The Corolla lurched backwards with a screech, freed at last from the deadly grasp of the garage, and smashed through the remains of the garage door, dragging the splintered remains of the door out with it as it went.

A shudder traveled through the garage as the metal doorframe collapsed, and a chunk of ceiling fell onto a bench covered in Clear's artwork. The sculpture of Alex made from debris of Flight 180 fell over, toppling down towards the floor, and the sharp base of it thunked into the fallen can of turpentine, rupturing the side. The can rolled once, then became stuck on a piece of discarded chewing-gum on the floor, stopping upside down. A thick stream of dark liquid ran out, trickling down the inclining garage floor, heading unerringly towards the car.

Inside the car, Clear breathed a sigh of relief as the Corolla lurched away from the house... then screamed as the power line came whipping out of nowhere and thudded onto the hood of the car. Sparks flew, and the inside of the car filled with an ear-splitting electrical zapping sound as the current discharged through the metal body of the car, into the ground. Power crackled along the metal chassis, and an instant later the electrical system of the small car erupted, burning out in an instant.

The engine died with a small, sad whine.

"No!" Clear pounded on the fuel gauge as the needle flicked to zero, and then she shrank back from the window as the power line crawled up the hood towards her. Her grip tightened on the steering wheel as a sick realization went through her.

She was trapped, and there was nobody here to save her.

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Alex ran around the side of the house, leaping over bushes and brambles that dragged at his clothes. Sweating and out of breath, he came face-to-face with yet another nightmare. An old-fashioned car was stalled in the driveway, resting on top of the demolished remains of the garage door, which lay in pieces strewn all over the driveway. A live power line rested sadistically atop the vehicle, the exposed end of the cable fluttering and whipping from side to side, sending crackling lines of blue electricity cascading like water across the top and sides of the car.

And Clear was inside the car, screaming for help.

Alex raced forward, his heart in his mouth.

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Clear stared out of the shattered windscreen of the car as the cable did a triumphant dance on the hood, and felt something inside her become very still. So this was it. Alex was dead, and now she was about to die, too. Smoke curled up from the air vents inside the car, and Clear began to cough, her mind going into overdrive as she tried to come up with a plan to escape from this deadly mess she had got herself into. How could she have been so stupid? If only she had stayed in the house, she would've been safe.

But she hadn't, and now she was about to die.

Alone.

"Don't move!"

Clear jerked her head up desperately to see an impossible sight. Alex was standing in the driveway, right behind the car. For a moment, she thought that she was seeing a ghost, silhouetted through the thick pall of smoke from the burning tires, then he stepped towards her and she realized that he was real. He was soaked through and covered in a dozen bloody cuts, but he was alive.

Clear's heart leapt at the sight. Alex wasn't dead! That meant that she was okay too, right? The tension went out of her in a blast and she stretched a hand towards the handle of the car door, eager to be reunited with him.

"DON'T MOVE! Stay there!"

Clear whipped her hand back in fright. She looked up at Alex, confused, as he ran over to the side window and peered in at her.

"You're grounded by the tires, okay? Don't touch *anything*!"

Clear gulped. Her fingers had been an inch from the metal door handle. She realized how close she had come to getting electrocuted and her head swam with renewed fear. She hurriedly drew her legs up onto the seat to avoid touching anything metal. She looked up at Alex, close to tears, awaiting instructions.

On the windshield, the power line whipped again, snapping at Alex as though warning him away. Alex stared at it for a moment, sparks reflected in his steel-blue eyes, and then an idea struck him. He ran over to the garage where a large pile of garden tools lay. Grabbing a wood-handled shovel, he approached the car with a look of determination on his sweat-streaked face.

Clear tensed as Alex lashed out with his shovel at the power line, trying to knock it off the car. What was he doing? Surely that was a surefire way to get himself chargrilled? She watched as Alex swung the end of the shovel around in a broad arc, holding tightly onto the insulated wooden handle, trying to scoop the cable off the car without touching the deadly live end. The cable twisted away from him with a malicious buzz and flopped across the broken windshield as though trying to get to Clear. Inside the car, sparks spat in through a hole in the glass and Clear pressed herself back into her seat, trying to get as far away from it as possible.

Claustrophobia hit her full force. She had had enough of all of this. She wanted to get out of the car, out of this death trap on wheels, and just run and run and run.

She forced herself to breathe, sucking the smoky air in through her nose and out through her mouth. If she let herself succumb to her instincts, she would be lost forever.

Alex was here, and he was going to save her. She would be fine.

Alex struck at the cable again just as the live end turned towards him, hissing, and blue-tinged smoke billowed up from the car as the paint vaporized in the heat. A jolt of power from one of the hanging filaments touched the metal part of the shovel, and there was a squeal of power and a small explosion of stinging sparks as the

current briefly short-circuited itself. The shovel was ripped from Alex's grasp and flung ten feet from the car, back towards the garage...

...where the sharp edge of the scoop cleanly sliced the top off of a large can of propane gas that Clear used for her blowtorch.

Alex watched in horror as the top of the canister flew off, releasing a stream of super-cooled flammable gases. The canister took off like a rocket, bumping and clattering across the workbench before rebounding off a sculpture and heading back towards them. Alex made a flying leap to intercept the canister, but even as his fingers stretched out towards it, the power cable spun around in his direction, nastily spraying sparks towards his face. Alex threw himself to the ground to avoid being electrocuted, dancing stars filling his vision.

With a hiss, the propane canister flew beneath the car, lodging out of reach beneath the oil sump. Alex lay on the ground, staring under the car. His eyes flew to the red "DANGER" logo on the hissing tank, and he grew very still.

Oh, crap!

Alex exploded into action, leaping to his feet and making a wild grab for another shovel to try to hook the canister out from under the car. While he was distracted, the power cable suddenly flew off the hood and danced inside the garage as though looking for something. Sparks dropped into the stream of spilled turpentine on the garage floor, igniting it instantly. Blue fire flared up and then shot across the garage floor, flying out towards the car.

Meanwhile, Clear saw that the power cable had gone from the car and made an urgent grab for the door handle, her heart pounding as she struggled to get the door open. She had to get out!

Too slow.

*Whuuuuuummmm!* The cable touched something metal in the garage and propelled itself back outside again, landing on the roof of the car with a hissing thump. It slithered back down the windshield with renewed intent.

Clear jumped away from the door with a cry of frustration, curling herself back up on her seat. Was there no end to this nightmare?

Then she yelped as she saw a line of fire racing towards her out of the garage, heading towards the car. As Clear watched in horror, the fire raced along the thin trickle of turpentine that had flowed down the sloping driveway and pooled under the front tire of the Corolla.

Right beneath the propane canister.

Alex saw the fire shoot under the belly of the car and leapt away from it, his heart hammering as he backed off, trying to think through the clouds of blind panic that descended upon him.

He was out of time. The car was going to blow up with Clear inside of it.

The moment she touched the door handle—or any metal part of the car—she would be fried.

There was no time for him to find something insulated to remove the power line from the car.

Come on, Browning. Think!

Flames licked up hungrily from beneath the car, scouring the paintwork and blackening the window, and Alex knew he had only moments before the canister blew up in the heat. He saw Clear looking at him in concern, and realized she hadn't seen the propane canister go under the car. A million thoughts raced through his head. Clear was about to die if he didn't save her, but once again, he was too late. Clear was going to die, right there in front of him, and there was nothing he could do, but stand there and watch.

There was only one thing he *could* do.

He swallowed, moving as close to the window as he dared.

"The car's gonna explode!" he yelled over the raging flames, and watched all the blood drain from Clear's face. Eerie echoes of déjà vu from Flight 180 spiked through him as he edged closer, trying to think of a way of getting Clear out of the car without getting both of them killed. He was all out of ideas, and Clear was all out of time. Alex heard a distinct fizzing sound from beneath the car as the paint burned off the insulated canister, and realized that she had only seconds of her life left.

He had to get her out of the car.

But how?

Sitting in the Corolla, Clear was fast losing her grip and was beginning to shit bricks. Her hand was halfway to the door handle, her instinct to grab the handle and get out almost overwhelming. She stared at the dancing shadows on the garage wall. The fire roared angrily, but the flickering shadows on the garage wall did not match the flames; it was almost as though there was some invisible presence lurking there, watching her.

Clear shrank back, tears of terror running down her face.

Meanwhile, Alex stepped closer to the car. He glanced around quickly, but there was nothing non-metal that he could grab to move the power line with in time.

There was only one way he could save Clear now.

And it wasn't going to be fun.

Alex quickly considered, then bent down towards the side window, gazing intently at Clear. She turned her frightened, tearful face towards him, and the look of absolute trust in her eyes overwhelmed him. The fog of uncertainty was blasted away in his mind, to be replaced by a warm sense of calmness.

His mind made up, Alex steeled himself and leaned in towards the car, his eyes seeking hers. "I can only hold on for so long. You know what to do."

Clear stared at him, aghast. Her eyes flicked to the power cable and back to Alex as she got his meaning. "No!" she gasped.

Alex stood firm. "When I do this, it'll skip you and it'll all be over! It's the only way we can cheat Death again!"

Clear knew that Alex was right, but she didn't want to face what he was about to do. "No! Don't!" she sobbed.

"Clear!" yelled Alex, as precious seconds ticked past. "I'm not gonna let it beat us both! *You know what to do!*"

Clear stared at Alex through the smoke-shrouded window, and tears began to stream silently down her face.

Alex took a deep breath, steeling himself for what lay ahead. It was almost as if he could see fate, a dark shadow in his mind, streaming towards them with its hideous maw gaping open, ready to receive them both.

This time he was no longer running away from it.



He looked deep into Clear's eyes, as if memorizing them for eternity.

"I'll always be with you," he said.

Then he stepped directly in front of the car, staring down at the power line.

At that moment, there was a screech of tires and the FBI sedan and two sheriff patrol cars rocketed upwards into Clear's driveway. As they skidded to a halt, Agents Schreck and Weine stared out of the window, their jaws dropping at the bizarre sight of yet another Flight 180 survivor about to get fried.

The two agents watched in amazement as Alex stepped towards Clear's blazing car, his gaze fixed on the sparking fallen power line that lay across the hood, staring at it as if hypnotized.

Crazy kid. What the hell did he think he was going to do, pick it up with his bare hands?

As though on cue, Alex stretched out his hands towards it.

"Alex, get away from there!" Agent Weine shouted out of the window. "Any part of that line touches you, you're dead!"

As though to reinforce this, the power line snapped in Alex's direction, spraying a jet of sparks at him. Alex lurched backwards instinctively, then hardened his resolve and stepped towards the hood of the burning car.

"Nooooooooooo!" screamed Clear.

Too late. Gritting his teeth, Alex reached down towards the power line. With a shout of defiance he snatched it off the hood of the car.

Instantly, all his senses were whited-out by the massive shock of the current as the full voltage of the power line discharged itself through his body into the ground. Every muscle in his body contracted as the current blasted through his flesh, his bones, his nerves, his synapses; tracing a glowing red line down one side of his body and pouring out through his boots into the wet earth at his feet. Smoke curled up from his hands and his skin started to bubble and blister as the power line fought to free itself from his grip, cracking and jerking like a whip.

Still Alex held on, staring at Clear as the current raged through his body. Then he fell backwards, his nervous system disrupting, pulling

the power line off the car.

The moment the line left the hood, Clear yanked open the door and flung herself out... just as the propane tank beneath the car finally ignited, blowing the front of the Corolla up into the air.

Fire raced through the torn up guts of the car, and an instant later the car's own fuel tank blew up in an avalanche of white fire, the shock wave of the blast throwing Clear and Alex away from the car.

Alex was flung backwards into the garage. He smacked into a pile of artwork before falling limply to the ground, the power line still clutched in his blackened hands. His body jerked as the current continued to flow through him, white lines of power rippling over his body. Then the power line finally overloaded, shorting out with a *bang*.

Clear was thrown ten feet across the yard by the explosion, landing with a winding thud on the grass by a thorny bush. Almost instantly, she was on her feet, running back towards the garage where Alex lay sprawled.

In the driveway, Agents Schreck and Weine leapt out of the car and ran towards the pair, fearing disaster. They reached Clear just as she got to her feet and took off like a rocket towards the garage, where the smoking form of Alex lay prone on the cold concrete.

The two agents looked at each other, sharing an unhappy thought. They had just lost their prime suspect.

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In the garage, Alex stared up at the ceiling, unmoving, swimming in the black, sickly tides of shock. He was barely conscious, and what little of his mind remained was filled with an unending whir of pain. He felt as though every molecule in his body had been wrenched out of place and then cemented back in place with hot pitch. He was vaguely aware of the sounds of running and yelling in the distance, but he couldn't hear them so well, because his body was shutting down, bit by bit, stealing his consciousness away from him with each second that passed.

A rush of black static buzzed up his body, mingling with the roaring in his ears, and as a crushing pain spread through his chest, Alex realized that he was feeling this way because his heart was skipping, knocked out of synch by the massive blast of electricity. He listened to it pounding in his head, beating slowly, irregularly, as though every beat might be its last.

*Thud-thud.*

*Thud... Thud.*

*Thud... Thud... Thud...*

As Alex lay there on the floor, smoke drifting up from his singed body, the world flickered around him and the whole chaotic, intricate pattern of life spun out inside his head like tangled videotape. It was all meaningless and yet meant everything, the smallest events mushrooming outwards in a chain reaction that swept everything in its path into a fatal collision with the Grim Reaper from which there were no escapes.

Still, he realized he'd been lucky.

With his vision, he'd been given something precious—a second chance.

With that chance, he'd broken the pattern.

With his death, he had given Clear back her life.

Out of all the meaninglessness of existence, he had created meaning, and denied Death what it craved the most—their lives.

Fate could go screw itself.

*Thud... .. thud.*

As the world closed in on him, Alex watched with dimming vision as shadows skittered out of the darkness and enveloped him, cold as the night, black as Death, blotting out the world and pulling his mind away into a timeless, eternal void. The roaring in his ears started to die away, like the winds of a great storm finally breaking, ebbing away into a soothing breeze that seemed to caress his face, like a repentant lover administering final rites, even as the gun smoked in his hand.

*Thud...*

Surprisingly, Alex's last thought before the darkness claimed him was not of fate, his parents, or even of himself, but a strong hope that

Carter would not hit on Clear at his funeral.

Alex gave a tiny smile.

His heart stopped beating, and everything turned to black.

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A moment later, Clear pounded into the garage and fell to her knees beside Alex, desperately praying that he was alive, that he had survived this and would live to tell the tale. The stench of singed flesh hung heavily on the air, and wispy gray smoke drifted up from his limp body.

He wasn't moving.

"Alex!" cried Clear. She reached down and shook him, then gingerly grabbed hold of his hand where he had held onto the power cable, turning it over. His palm was a smoking, blackened mess, through which dull red blood slowly seeped. Burn marks scorched a line down the inside of his torn, bloodied jacket. She put her thumb on his wrist, feeling for a pulse.

Nothing.

Clear started shaking, not even aware of the tears that silently streamed down her face as she called his name over and over. After everything that had happened, after everything he had promised her, Alex had gone and left her, and now she was truly alone in the world.

"Dammit!" she cried. "Don't do this to me!"

Alex was gone, lying there in a pool of smoke and blood, the expression on his face utterly at peace.

An instant later, Agents Schreck and Weine tore into the garage, pulling Clear back away from Alex as they dropped to their knees beside him, feeling for a pulse.

Agent Schreck leaned over Alex's face, listening. "He's not breathing!" he shouted. He shared an anxious look with Agent Weine as he pulled out his radio and called for help. Next, he quickly knelt over Alex and began CPR.

Outside, a web of lightning cracked across the heavens, as if Death was making a final angry proclamation.

Kneeling beside Alex's smoking body, Clear started to sob.

# THIRTEEN

The turbines on the sleek aircraft whined as the giant machine backed smoothly into the landing dock at Charles de Gaulle Airport. The air was calm outside, the low-lying clouds hanging on the horizon painted with a red glow by the last of the evening sunlight. The airstrip was busy this time of night, filled with the roar of jet aircraft landing and taking off, and the whine of motors as baggage handlers scurried back and forth like insects in their electric bag carts, cheerfully going about their duty of losing their passengers' baggage, one suitcase at a time.

Carter unstrapped himself from his cushioned seat and watched as the seatbelt signs pinged off, breathing a sigh of relief. He knew it was stupid to have been so tense about the flight, but still, it never hurt to be cautious, especially considering everything that had happened to him so far that year.

What a year it had been. Carter shivered at the thought.

He stood up in the aisle, stretching to soothe his cramped limbs, then reached up and pulled a huge bag out of the overhead locker. The bag clinked loudly as it came down off the plastic shelf, and Carter hurried to zip the top shut before its alcoholic contents fell out and bounced off the head of the disapproving little old lady sitting opposite him. She had been glaring at him unflinchingly throughout the entire flight.

"Well, we made it," he announced, smiling ruefully. Despite the long flight, he looked fresh and bright-eyed in his crisp white T-shirt and black leather jacket.

"Paris!" Clear smiled back at him, pulling her own bag down off the locker shelf. She had highlighted her hair with pretty blonde streaks, and looked well-rested and even more beautiful than ever. She glanced out of the window, half expecting to see the rust-red terrain of Mars instead of a pretty French cityscape. It certainly felt like they had traveled further than a mere few thousand miles across the pond. She nodded out of the window.

"I can't believe it."

She glanced over at Carter and they shared a look that only the two of them could possibly understand.

There was only one other person in the whole world who would get that look.

"I just can't believe we got on a plane again, you know what I'm saying?"

Alex grabbed his bag off the seat and bounded up behind Clear with a grin. She smiled back up at him, a look of pure mischief on her face.

A whole week in Paris... in the springtime.

Just the three of them.

Alex winked at Clear, then turned and glanced out of the window, as if to reassure himself that they really were on the ground. The burns on his hands had now almost completely healed, as had the scorch marks on his chest caused by the defibrillation equipment. It was only the slight limp in his step that gave away how close to death he had come.

Clear looked up at him happily, thinking how handsome he looked in his new gray sweater and short, spiky haircut. Then she turned and walked down the aisle of the bustling cabin, eager to be out in the fresh air where they could start their adventure. Alex playfully grabbed her by the shoulders and followed her, massaging the tension out of her neck, elated by how brave they had all just been. Six months had done something to dull the memories, but this entire trip had still been a test that they had all passed with flying colors.

True, there had been a couple of minutes during takeoff when his nerves had become a little dodgy, but Clear's hand squeezing his had been enough to ground him, and he had come through the experience with no problems whatsoever. Getting back on a plane and flying to this destination was like the final kick in the balls to Death: not only had they beaten it, once and for all, but they had proved that they weren't afraid of it, and that they could take everything it could throw at them, and they'd come bouncing back for more.

Now, they just had to get Carter through customs, and everything would be fine.

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Stars twinkled overhead as Alex, Clear and Carter ordered drinks at a little outdoor restaurant named Le Miro 81, and sat back to enjoy the evening. It was so surreal to be here, after everything that had happened. Clear gazed around her in wonder as the waiter bustled off to get their menus, drinking it all in.

So, this was Paris. It was everything she expected, and more, mainly because she was sharing it with two people she actually gave a damn about. Everything seemed so fresh and vibrant. The food she'd had so far was excellent, and the people had tolerated their pathetic attempts at speaking the language with good-natured amusement. The night air was cool and fragrant with the smell of wood smoke and home cooking, and lights shone down on the trio from a distant hilltop as they sat back in their seats, relaxing and unwinding after their long trip.

Around them, the city bustled with a hive of activity: people out walking, talking, wining and dining, and generally enjoying the night air. An old man on a bike slowly pedaled across the cobbled streets, winding his way through the pedestrians and tourists on his way home. Lights were strung amid the bare branches of the trees, and overhead, neon crackled up and down the giant, cheerfully buzzing café sign, announcing the name of the restaurant in ten-foot tall letters.

"Volià." The black-and-white uniformed waiter poured Alex his drink, then stepped back with a flourish as if he was serving him fine champagne rather than just beer in a fancy tall glass.

"Merci," said Alex, and he meant it. He leaned back in his seat and looked around him with an expression of deep satisfaction on his face. He breathed the fragrant evening air into his lungs, savoring the sights and sounds around him.

"Wow. It's weird being here, huh?" he said to Clear, smiling. "We finally completed the puzzle."

Clear looked at him with affection, smiling indulgently.



The three of them sat in silence for a moment, basking in the feeling of fulfillment. They had finally made it.

Then Alex caught Clear's eye and sighed, gazing around him with a wistful look on his face. "It's just... There's something missing..."

After a moment, Carter silently raised his glass. Alex stared at him for second before he understood and lifted his own glass.

"To Terry," said Carter.

"To Tod."

"To all our friends who can't be here," added Clear, clinking her wine glass with the two boys. "Cheers."

They sipped their drinks in silence, eyeing each other; three friends at the end of a journey, in more ways than one. Carter took a mouthful of drink and then gave a strange little giggle.

Alex looked at him. "What?"

Carter smiled ruefully, setting his glass down with a *clank*. "If you'd told me six months ago that the three of us would be sitting here having a drink..."

Alex laughed, feeling the tension break over him like water, and he nudged Clear.

"Yeah."

Carter joined in his laughter, then his expression sobered up. All of his macho stupidity had gone, and a new light of confidence shone behind his eyes. He looked at his two classmates, his head cocked to one side as he mulled over the events of the last half year.

"No, I mean that, sometimes it feels like the two of you are the only ones who can really understand me."

Alex looked hard at him, but there was no sarcasm in Carter's eyes.

He really meant it.

Wonders would never cease.

Outside the café, a lone acoustic guitarist in a scarf and flat cap began softly playing the opening bars of a pretty tune. As the notes drifted out across the night air, Carter sighed in contentment, leaning back in his chair.

"You were right, Browning. It did skip us. There was a design, but we beat it, you know? We won."

"I think that the only thing we've 'won', Carter, is the chance of a full life."

Clear looked across at Alex, her eyes shining, then reached over and took his hand, squeezing it tightly. Her eyes lit up as she gazed up at him, her face flushed with pride. "A chance that I won't ever waste."

Alex smiled back at her and then put down his drink. "There's just something I can't figure out about the design..." He dived into his pocket for a piece of paper.

Carter rolled his eyes, grimacing at his classmate. Here we go again.

"Alex... just let it go, alright?" scolded Clear. She'd heard enough about Death to last her a lifetime. This was Paris. They were supposed to be enjoying themselves.

"Just hear me out, alright?" Alex pulled the paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. It was the airplane seating plan, battered and creased by months of wear.

"Oh my God!" Carter couldn't believe that Alex was still on this fate kick. This trip was all about putting the past behind them and restarting their lives, wasn't it? Why drag all this stuff up again now and bring them all down? The guy was obsessed!

"Just hear me out." Alex held up his hands before scooting his chair in closer to the table and leaning forward over the diagram. "The path of the explosion determined the order of our deaths, right?"

Carter and Clear shared an ironic glance, but said nothing.

Alex went on, unabashed, pointing at the seating chart. "When I intervened and saved Carter, it skipped him and went to the next person in the path of the explosion: Billy." Alex stabbed a finger at the page. "Then it was Clear, but I intervened and saved her so it went to me, but in my case, no one intervened, right?" He glanced up at the other two for confirmation, mistaking their looks of exasperation for looks of disbelief. He sat up, warming to his topic. "I was thrown from that power line by the explosion. So..."

Carter glowered. He'd had enough. "So why did it skip you, right?"

Clear sat forward, determined to put an end to Alex's little rant. "How do we know that this wasn't exactly what was meant to happen? That out of everyone on Flight 180, you, me and Carter were meant to live?"

Carter nodded and jerked a thumb at Clear as if to say, "Listen to the woman!"

"Maybe that was the design all along," suggested Clear gently.

Carter took a big swig of his beer. "Or you could still be next," he snorted through a mouthful of foam.

That wasn't funny. Clear glared at him. "Shut up, Carter."

Carter grinned hugely at her, starting to enjoy this idea, then waggled his eyebrows at Alex. "What? I didn't make up the rules. Somebody's gotta intervene before Death can skip 'em. You've proved that three times. With the plane, with me, with you..." He straightened his jacket smugly. "For all I know, it could circle back and get us all again." He sat back triumphantly.

Alex shot him a dirty look.

Carter just grinned at him. "But I'm the safest fucker in the world, because you're still next." He jammed his stubby fingernail down onto the seating plan, pointing to a seat marked with a big cross and the word "ME."

Alex stared down at the plan, blinking.

Slowly, a horrified realization began to dawn on him. For once in his life, Carter had a point. What if he was right? And why had he just assumed that once Death had run its course, it wouldn't just start all over again, never stopping until they were all dead and the laws of causality had been righted?

Alex's mind went into overdrive, processing this new train of thought. Behind him, the acoustic guitarist started to sing. Alex didn't need to speak French to identify the song, and his gut lurched as he recognized the artist.

John fucking Denver, again!

A sick feeling slowly welled up in Alex's stomach, and he suddenly saw himself, as though from above, sitting exposed in the tiny French restaurant, surrounded by a whole world full of danger. The sounds of the street faded out, and Alex turned around to stare over his

shoulder at the thousand and one hazards that seemed to loom over him, all of a sudden, from every direction.

There! Across the road. A butcher rolled up the back of a delivery van and sunk his meat hook into a slab of hacked-open pork, the pig's dirty ribcage exposed to everybody on the street. The butcher wasn't wearing any gloves.

Food poisoning! Salmonella!

Above him, up on some scaffolding, a workman dropped an iron bar, which rolled dangerously close to the edge, knocking over a bucket of nails which clattered down into the street, unnoticed.

Cracked skull! Tetanus!

A chill wind blew, and Alex jumped in his seat as the suited waiter ignited the heat lamp behind him. It caught with a rush of fire as the gas was turned up too high.

Burning! Electrocutation!

Alex looked around him like a panicked obsessive compulsive who had just lost all of his keys, his heart hammering. The wind blew again in a sudden sharp blast, making the glasses on the table rattle. A moment later, Clear's glass of red wine spilled, gushing over the seating chart. Spooked, Alex jumped to his feet and stared down at it. The red wine ran down and pooled over his name, and to Alex's heated imagination, it looked just like blood.

Alex started, wild-eyed, then convulsively leapt away from the table, cold terror flooding his heart.

It wasn't over, even when it was over. Death had been mocking him, trying to lull him into a false sense of security while it bided its time, preparing to strike.

Carter looked up at him in amusement. Browning was freaking out again. So what else was new? He should just have himself locked up in a loony bin and be done with it. He watched as Alex held up his hands, panting shallowly. He had gone as white as a sheet.

"I'm gonna meet you guys back at the hotel, okay?"

Just wait. I'll go with you." Clear sighed and reached under the table for her bag.

"No. Just stay here, Clear. Stay away." Alex held up a hand towards her in panic.

Carter peered down at the wine-soaked seating chart, then laughed. "See? It's true. I told you that you were next." He chuckled to himself, pleased at his own joke.

"Carter, stop it," snapped Clear. Last thing Alex needed when he was in this state was to have someone stirring him up.

It was too late, Alex was gone.

Clear shook her head sadly. So much for her romantic evening.

As Alex strode away, a strong wind kicked up out of nowhere. Clear frowned and turned her face into the wind, listening. Her now-blond hair streamed out behind her, and she half-closed her eyes, as though trying to figure something out. Something was nagging at her from the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, and her eyes flicked sideways to see the reflection of a green bus flowing across the café's large plate-glass window. Clear expectantly turned her head to the road to see...

Nothing.

The street was empty.

A sudden knife of dread slammed into her, and she glanced back over to Alex, starting to freak out. She just had the feeling that something was...

"ALEX, LOOK OUT!" she yelled suddenly.

Alex reflexively leapt backwards as a bus came out of nowhere and shot towards him at high speed. Mindlessly, he stumbled backwards and threw up his hands to protect his head. A rush of stale wind sideswiped his face, and he staggered away from the road, his heart pounding.

Missed me!

Dammit, Carter was right! He couldn't believe Carter was right!

It wasn't over, even when it was over!

Ten feet further along, the bus lurched as the driver reacted too late to the boy who had just stepped out into the road. He yanked hard on the wheel, sending the bus careering into the opposite lane, right in front of an oncoming car.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. The car's horn beeped a warning, swerving rapidly to avoid the bus. The bus driver

panicked and swung the wheel around to avoid the car, but it was traveling too fast for such a maneuver and instantly spun out of control. The wheel ripped itself from the driver's hands, spinning three-sixty as the bus mounted the sidewalk and rode along it, smashing a pile of wooden food crates into splinters and sending a delivery guy leaping for cover. Shouts and screams rang out as the bus struck an ancient iron lamppost beyond them. Such was its speed and momentum that it shattered the brittle base of the lamp, sending the whole thing spinning up into the air.

The end of the post described a curved trajectory as it hummed through the night air before impacting at full speed on the metal framework holding up the giant "Le Miro 81". sign on the rooftop. Sparks spat, and the sign exploded like a firework as the high-voltage power illuminating it was severed. The cables, which tethered the sign to the roof, snapped in quick succession.

The whole thing started to topple sideways.

At the last moment, it caught halfway off the roof, jerked to a halt by a chain that tethered one end to the rooftop, and the last three letters of the sign broke off and swung down towards the street, still attached to their power cables.

Alex had blinked twice and it had been over. He turned around in slow-motion, blinking owlishly upwards as the sign arced lazily down towards him through the night, swinging like a scythe on its one remaining cable...

"ALEX!" screamed Clear.

Alex's jaw started to drop as the sign fell towards him. There was no time to think, to move, to even breathe before—

*BLAM!!* Alex fell hard on the ground as Carter grabbed him in a flying tackle and knocked him out of the path of the giant swinging sign. An instant later, the sign whizzed over his head with such force that if he had still been standing there, he would have been instantly decapitated.

The two boys rolled over and over before finishing up in a heap in the gutter. As the bus ground to a shuddering halt behind them, Carter pushed himself off Alex and convulsively jumped to his feet, backing away and staring at the devastation that surrounded Alex—

the honking cars, the crashed bus, the shattered sign, the screaming Parisians.

*"I told you you were next!"* he panted, staring down at Alex.

Alex lay on the ground, too freaked out to move. Two near-death experiences in under ten seconds had been a little too much for even him to take.

Boy, had he been lucky that Carter had been there to save him.

A sudden realization slammed into his head, and Alex levered himself up on his elbows, staring up at Carter.

"Then it just skipped me," he said breathlessly.

Carter started to reply, but Alex was no longer listening. All of his attention was currently focused on the three, ten-foot tall, neon letters silently whirring towards Carter's head on the backswing.

Seen upside down, the letters read "180."

Carter frowned. "Then who's next?" he asked.